Hearth Stories

Issue Four, Summer Solstice 2025

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Hearth Stories is a digital speculative fiction magazine exploring connection, family, relationships, comfort, and the natural world. For more information, please visit hearthstories.org.

Produced and Edited by Sloum.

A Letter from the Editor

Wow! I waited too long to write this letter. I already published this issue through our distribution partners and woke up this morning—the morning of release for this issue—and realized that I had not written a foreward!

Well, the heat has come and it feels like summer here in the mountains. We finally managed to get some peas to grow to harvest this year, and were excited for that. I hope all you readers out there have had a lovely spring.

This issue finds us with more great stories from some familiar folk, as well as some newcomers to the magazine. We have stories of gods, of isolated caretakers, of witches, wanderers, and—of course—a few tiny people. As always, I am very proud to share these stories with you!

I would like to take a moment to take note of a story featured in this issue by Amanda Fetters that features characters working with wool. The use of wool as featured in this story is integral to the plot

and true to the setting. The story does not feature animal cruelty or commodifying animals in the way of modern industrial society. I felt it was important to mention this here for those who value *Hearth Stories* as a vegan publication.

I look forward to connecting with you all again come winter. In the meantime: find a shady spot, a cool glass of something, and a good story to beat the summer heat.

—Sloum, Editor

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A Different Kind of Worship

By J.C. Pillard

Ruldi was dying. And Salix was dying with him.

He sat beside the old man, holding his thin hand. He had been by Ruldi's side for eight decades now, and the man lying in bed, his face creased in pain, was the last of them. The last of Salix's worshippers.

Ruldi stirred, looking towards the god beside the bed. "You're here," he rasped.

Salix managed a smile. "Of course I am."

"I'm sure there are others who seek your aid, my lord," Ruldi said. "You needn't spend so much time on me."

Salix winced. The old man's memory had been slipping for years and had only worsened lately. He couldn't tell him the truth: that there was no one else now. That when Ruldi died, Salix would go with him. Gods only existed so long as someone had faith in them. If none believed, then the god died.

But he could not tell his last worshipper this, so instead he squeezed his hand. "I will stay with you to the end."

Later, when Ruldi slept, Salix let himself out into the courtyard of the large house. The sounds of the city were muted beneath the bubbling of the Silverlode river, which the villa abutted. He crossed the tiled yard, coming to rest beneath his willow where it bent over the waterway. He pressed a hand against the bark, feeling the touch in his chest, the connection that tethered him to the tree. With a sigh, Salix slipped down in the shade, closing his eyes.

He was trying to prepare himself for the coming end. Amongst gods, death was seldom talked of. No divine being wants to admit their immortality may be an exaggeration. Salix supposed he could advertise, try to accrue enough worshippers to continue. But that felt cheap, as though he could sell his divinity for ready coin.

The sound of a step made him blink his eyes open. Had Ruldi followed him outside? It had happened before, though the illness had kept the old man bound to his bed for many days now.

It was not Ruldi. Instead, Salix beheld a tall figure standing in the middle of the courtyard, looking up at the house with a placid expression. Their hair was long and silver, and they wore a blue duster over trousers and a loose shirt. Their skin was dusty brown, the color of citrine in morning light.

And when they turned to look at Salix, he felt a thrum of recognition in his chest. This was no human. This was a god.

He stood, inclining his head. "Forgive my lack of hospitality. I did not hear you approach." He tried to keep his voice steady, uneasy at the other god's sudden appearance.

The figure smiled. "Are you the master of this house?"

"I—no, I'm not. The master is indisposed."

"You are his god, then."

"I am."

The figure cocked their head. "You have no temple where you might be found, but only a simple courtyard."

"Yemala is home to many gods, and not all of them have great temples," Salix said, bristling. "I count myself lucky to have a home beside this villa's hearth."

The figure's eyebrows went up. "I meant no offense," they said. "I have passed this house often and often admired it. I am delighted to meet the god who calls it home at last."

"You must have a temple close by, then."

"Of a kind."

"May I ask your name, if we are such close neighbors?"

The figure paused as if to think. "You may call me Argenti," they said finally. "And you?"

"Salix."

Argenti smiled. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Salix."

"And you," Salix replied, though he wasn't sure it was a pleasure at all. He didn't like another god sniffing around the house, not while Ruldi was on his death bed. Whether he was protective of his last believer, or of his own existence, he wasn't sure.

A bell tolled somewhere in the city, and Argenti turned. "Forgive me," they said. "I must go." With a final nod to Salix, they stepped down towards the courtyard's gate, passing through it like water.

Salix released a breath. Argenti. He didn't recognize their name, and that made him nervous. Gods sometimes tried to steal worshippers from each other, though it was perfectly possible to worship more than one god. But divine beings were like magpies; they liked collecting things, and they hated sharing. Still, Argenti had not seemed hostile, merely curious.

A cough sounded in the house, and Salix stiffened. Turning, he went back inside.

Ruldi's cough worsened that night, and Salix spent much of the dark hours attending to him with willow bark tea and tinctures bought from local merchants. He wished he could do more, but he was only a minor god and his power was not great. When at last Ruldi slipped back into sleep, Salix went outside again, back to his tree. The courtyard was dreadfully empty, and the stillness made him shudder. He knew he shouldn't leave his last worshipper alone for long, but just then, as the

horizon was lightening, Salix wasn't sure he could bear the solitude.

He stepped up to the willow and carefully broke off a twig. A twinge of pain—there and gone—made him wince as the stick cracked off, and he tucked it in his pocket. As long there was life in the branch, he would be able to move freely in the city.

Leaving the courtyard through a side door, Salix walked the streets of Yemala. He passed temples and storefronts, watching as the city began to stir. He had not always dwelt here, though he had come to think of it as home. The so-called "City of a Thousand Temples" had certainly earned its reputation. It stretched like a cat down from the foothills, growing outwards from the banks of the winding Silverlode river. A traveler couldn't turn down a street nor walk into a shop without encountering any number of minor gods, hunched beside their tiny temples. Moonflower, primrose, and lunaria dripped in bundles over shrines glowing with candles and smoking with incense. So heavy was the air sometimes that Salix found himself climbing the five hundred and sixty-two steps to the high temples above the city just to get a breath of cold mountain wind.

He turned there now, letting his feet take him along the winding roads. He was not one of those great gods with temples in the hills and thousands of worshippers, though he knew of some of them. Solaris, the Sun Lord. Amyra, the Lady of the Harvest. If Yemala had a head god, though, it would be the Silverlode itself. Each morning, the bells at the

river's high temple rang bright and clear, calling everyone to the winding waters. Parishioners left their small temples and shrines, moving in groups of two and three until they all joined together so that, from above, it appeared there was not one river in the city, but two. The clamor of conversation rose to a crescendo before falling to silence as the high priest said his blessing over the river, scattering flowers on its glassy surface. The Silverlode bore the life of the city upon its back, and when they died, the people of Yemala went to the next world via its waters.

The road Salix took climbed upwards into the foothills until it came at last to a flat ledge, a place for pilgrims to look out across Yemala. A few worshippers were there now, though they paid him little heed—gods were a common enough sight in Yemala that they didn't evoke any remark.

He stopped beside a broad, flat stone. Wax from prayer candles and the ashes of incense scattered as he sat, looking down upon the vast city and the many temples it held. Idly, he wondered which of them might be Argenti's but shook off the thought as quickly as it came. It didn't matter.

He watched the sun crest the horizon, turning the city gold. Of all the sights he would miss when he was gone, he might miss this one most of all.

Salix was not as surprised as he should have been to find Argenti in the courtyard again when he returned. They sat beneath the willow, a pair of

steaming teacups perched beside them among the roots. Even from where Salix stood, he could smell notes of rooibos and vanilla.

He glanced at the house, but all was as he'd left it. "Back again?" he asked, turning to the other god warily.

Argenti inclined their head. "I had to leave abruptly yesterday."

"What reason did you have to return?"

The other god gestured to the cups. "Would you like some tea? It's delicious, and I seldom have anyone to share it with."

Cautiously, Salix crossed the courtyard and sat. He picked up a cup, warming his hands on it, before taking a sip. It *was* delicious, the flavors bright and sparkling on his tongue.

Argenti watched him, their eyes curious. "Well?"

"The tea is very good," Salix said. "But why share it with me?"

"What do you mean?"

"It is obvious you are a greater god than I," Salix said, frowning. "I may not know where your temple is, or how many priests you have. But I have no doubt you have worshippers with whom to share your bounty. You have no need of companionship from a small god like me."

"Must I have need of something to want it?" Argenti gave him a sad smile. "You have not, perhaps, been to a great temple in some time. There is no laughter or companionship there. Pomp and ceremony, yes, but pleasantry, no. None of my priests would deign to have tea with me if I asked

them. I have grown too great for such things," they finished with a mocking tone.

"Thus you seek out the company of your own kind instead?"

"I do."

And I am no threat to your power, Salix thought, *because I am too small.* He studied Argenti's face. There was a sadness wrought there that he didn't understand. He wanted to turn the other god away, to be alone with Ruldi and the willow and his grief. But Ruldi was barely awake these days, and Salix had plenty of empty hours to fill with contemplations of his own end. Of late, he'd had quite enough solitude.

He took another sip of the tea. "I suppose," he said, cocking his head, "that I will *deign* to have tea with one so great as yourself."

Argenti laughed, a bright, almost bubbling sound. "I thank you for such generosity," they said, teeth flashing bright.

Salix smiled back. For the first time in weeks, it didn't feel forced.

Argenti came to visit every day. Once Salix finished tending to Ruldi, he would step outside to find them seated beneath the willow. The other god always smiled—a lighter, truer thing than Salix had seen on their face previously—and together they would talk. The conversations started off inconsequential—inane discussions of the weather,

the tea Argenti had brought. But as time passed, they deepened into something more.

"You have not always lived in the city," Argenti said a few weeks into their visits. The day was a pleasant one. Ruldi had slept better and was more lucid that morning, and Salix was grateful for it.

Now, sitting beside Argenti, he leaned back. "No, I have not."

"Where did you come from?"

"A town far to the east of here," Salix replied. He closed his eyes, trying to picture it. "I was dreamed into existence within a willow beside a large blue lake. People would come and leave offerings of food so I would bless their marriages." He turned to look at Argenti. The other god watched him, their own blue-green eyes thoughtful.

"What brought you here?"

Salix winced. "Famine. A bad harvest followed by a cruel winter and then a hot, dry summer. My people were dying. Eventually, some decided to leave, find greener pastures elsewhere. Yemala was great even in those days, so they came here seeking a new life." He paused, cocking his head. "What about you? Where were you before Yemala?"

"Nowhere."

"Really?" Salix said, surprised.

They nodded, that sad smile crossing their mouth. "I have been in Yemala for as long as I can remember."

"How long is that?"

"A very long time," Argenti said wryly. They looked towards the door of the house. "The man in

there, the one you're tending to. He's your last worshipper, isn't he?"

Salix stiffened. During these past few weeks, he had never brought up Ruldi. It felt profane somehow, as though sharing the pain of the old man would be tantamount to desecration. And some small, proud part of him didn't want this other god knowing that Salix's own existence was so fragile. Argenti might have hundreds of worshippers, and Salix had only one. Somehow, he couldn't bear the thought that they might pity him.

"I think you should go," he said, standing and heading to the house. "It's getting late." He didn't look back as he went inside, grief and loneliness weighing on him like broken branches.

The other god was not there the next morning. Salix opened the door, half-expecting to see Argenti leaning beside the willow, ready to laugh off the day before. He'd regretted his brusque manner almost immediately. Argenti had been a singular source of pleasure these past weeks, and his own foul temper had frightened away the last being who would ever know him.

He stood in the courtyard, undecided. What should he do? Ruldi was asleep, and though he was loathe to leave him, Salix couldn't shake the nagging voice in his head commanding him to find Argenti and apologize. The other god had said their temple was close-by, after all.

Carefully taking a twig from his willow, Salix left by the side gate and plunged into the maze of the city. There were temples of every conceivable size littering the streets: shrines no bigger than a bread box and temples that soared above the heads of passersby. He limited himself to these, since Argenti was clearly a greater god. Passing from temple to temple, he sought out their presence. Statues of half-snake women and dog-headed humans holding baskets of fruit met his eyes, the incense so thick it felt like he was swimming through it. But though he looked in every temple in his quarter, nowhere was there a sanctuary to a god named Argenti.

It was afternoon by the time he returned to the house, a frown burrowing between his brows. He pushed open the door into the courtyard—and found himself wrapped in a pair of firm, warm arms.

"You're still here," Argenti gasped, their face pressing against the top of his head. "I was so worried you'd gone."

Salix swallowed, feeling heat rise to his face. The other god's arms felt gentle, comforting. He wanted to remain there but couldn't quite bring himself to. He disentangled himself from Argenti, eyeing the other god. Argenti's face was a mask of relief, their hands fidgeting at their sides. They cleared their throat.

"I'm sorry I was late. I had business at my temple. But when I got here, and you were nowhere to be found ..." They trailed off, wincing.

"You thought I'd died."

Argenti nodded, shamefaced. "I was afraid. I went inside to find you."

Salix started, twitching towards the door. Ruldi was inside. He'd left Ruldi all alone, all morning, and now a virtual stranger had gone inside. What had they done? What had they *said*?

"You didn't tell him?" he demanded, whirling on Argenti. "Please. Say you didn't tell him of ... my condition."

Argenti blinked, then reached out and took Salix's hand. "No. Of course I didn't."

"What did you say to him?"

"I told him I was your friend. Your worshipper—Ruldi—was not awake for very long. But he told me of how you've been watching over him. I said he was lucky to have you."

Salix breathed a sigh of relief. Pulling away from Argenti, he went to sit beneath the willow. All the fight left him in a rush. It was all right. Ruldi didn't know.

"Why do you not tell him?" Argenti came to sit beside him, their face concerned.

Salix let his head fall back. "I have no wish to burden his spirit further. I have watched over Ruldi for more than eighty years. His wife passed, and then his children, all before him. He is alone. I could not bear for him to think he was leaving nothing behind, not even his god. It comforts him to believe I will remain. I cannot take that from him."

They sat silently together beneath the willow for some time. Salix thought of the old man inside the house, his frail body growing weaker by the day. He

wished, somehow, that there was more he could do for him. After a time, he turned and looked at Argenti.

"I could not find your temple."

Argenti flushed. "It is hard to find."

"But you are a great god, aren't you?"

"I am." They shifted, clearly uncomfortable.

"Could you help him?" Salix asked. "I have heard that some of the great gods have such power. To heal the sick, take away illnesses." He ceased speaking, a terrible hope rising in him. But the other god shook their head.

"There is nothing I can do," they replied. "I am no god of healing. There is a rot in his body. It has reached his lungs. I could postpone the end for a few weeks, perhaps, but his pain will not cease until his life does."

Salix winced. Extending Ruldi's life even a few weeks would sustain his own. His last worshipper, keeping him alive with the dregs of his belief. But Salix had watched Ruldi's pain for too many months to wish him more of it.

He shook his head. "No. I understand. I have no desire for him to suffer any more than he already has. If you can ease his passing, that is all I ask."

"You will do that better than I. He believes in you."

"I know," Salix said sadly.

Argenti cocked their head. "You know, you are strange for a god."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that most gods care little for the pain of their parishioners. They benefit from it, in fact. A suffering worshipper will ask you to ease their suffering. In exchange, they give you every piece of gold in their pocket, every morsel of bread from their table. A contented man will give you as little as they can, while a miserable one will give you all." They paused, giving that same, sad smile Salix had come to know. "A god can get fat off the pain of their congregation, as long as they never act to aid them."

"Then they do not deserve to be gods," Salix said, disgusted. "What good are we, if we do nothing for the people who need it most?"

"I never said I disagreed with you." Argenti reached out and took his hand once more. "I only said it makes you strange. But it is a strangeness I like."

"I think you might be strange, too," Salix said with a choked laugh.

"I think you may be right," Argenti agreed, grinning.

Their time together was easier after that. It was as though, in telling him of Ruldi, Salix had finally drawn back the curtain and shown someone the play was coming to an end. Argenti did not mention it again, though they began bringing teas and medicines for Ruldi that Salix could not get on his own. They left them wordlessly, like offerings. And the

medications did work, though never for as long as Salix would have liked.

Despite Argenti's help, Ruldi's illness worsened. His cough became wet and bloody, even with the most potent teas Salix could brew. He did his best to ease the old man's pain, but there came a day when he knew the end was nearing. And so, with no one else to do the office, Salix went to his willow and plucked another twig from it, heading into the city to seek a priest of the Silverlode who could prepare a berth for Ruldi's final voyage.

A few of the temple bells tolled distantly as Salix made the long trek up to the Silverlode's mouth, where it bubbled up from beneath the foothills. The priests of the river were responsible for the city's dead. They prepared a place for the bodies, where they could slip into the river's cold embrace and be carried away to the next world. Salix did not know if such a place really existed. If it did, he would never see it. But he hoped Ruldi would.

At last, he reached the top. The granite temple of the Silverlode stood above him, proud and dark in the morning light. He paused, fidgeting nervously. He had never been inside before.

Steeling himself, Salix crossed beneath the wide arches on either side of the river that flowed out of the temple. Inside, tall stands of flowers hugged the river's banks where it flowed out of the deep hole cut into the temple's back wall. The smell of myrrh permeated the air, and the low sound of chanting resonated in the huge space. Massive pillars lined the walls, supporting a ceiling far above. Salix looked up,

mouth open in awe. The ceiling was emblazoned with carvings of the Silverlode and the city below. Something about the carvings gave him pause, and he stopped, head tilting back. Amongst the carvings of the river was one figure repeated over and over, long hair flowing down from a dark face with a sad smile. A shock ran through him as he recognized that expression.

It was Argenti.

"Salix?"

He jumped, turning sharply towards the voice. Behind him, eyes wide, was Argenti. They were not dressed in the simple clothes they wore when they came to the courtyard. Instead, they wore a long blue robe threaded through with green. Argenti's long silver hair was pulled away from their face, making their features even sharper in the morning light.

"You're the Silverlode," Salix breathed. Of course. Of course, that was the only thing that made sense. How else would Argenti be able to travel to the house? They had said their temple was close because it was—their temple was the river itself. Salix had spent months with the god of the Silverlode, and he hadn't known at all.

Fury and pain suddenly rose up and choked him. Argenti was the greatest god of Yemala. Why would they waste time on a nobody like him? Had they been visiting only to see what it was like to be a god of nothing? The Silverlode would never die, but Salix *would*, and the idea that this great god had been watching him all this time out of some sick curiosity

was like a blade through his chest. Tears stung his eyes, humiliation burning in his body.

He turned, intending to march out of the temple altogether, when he felt Argenti's hand around his wrist. He shook them off, turning to face them.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he demanded.

Argenti's hands twitched, as though they meant to reach for him again. "Because you did not ask."

"I asked you where your temple was, what you were a god of. You—you never said anything." Salix bit down against the tears that burned his throat. He refused to cry in front of them, to see any more of that hateful pity in their eyes.

"I was going to tell you—"

"But you didn't." Salix pulled away as Argenti reached for him once more. "Don't touch me!" He took a deep breath, feeling dizzy and nauseous.

He turned his glare back to Argenti, who still stared at him with wide eyes. "Ruldi is dying," he said at last. "I came to ask your priests to prepare a berth."

"Salix, you know me better than any—"

"As you are here, and they are not, all I ask is that you convey that message to them. I do not expect it to be long now." Salix straightened, steadying himself. "Goodbye, Argenti." He turned towards the

city, his eyes barely seeing. Dimly, he heard Argenti call his name. He did not look back.

Ruldi was awake when he returned, the old man's eyes turned towards the door. He smiled when Salix entered, lifting a hand towards him weakly.

"My lord. I did not think I would see you tonight."

Salix steadied himself on the doorframe, summoning a smile. His chest hurt, and his hands felt cold. "I would never miss seeing you, Ruldi," he managed.

"Were you visiting my daughter?" Ruldi sighed. "Neha is such a pretty girl. She will grow up to be beautiful, I think."

The god winced, crossing to the stool beside the old man's bed. "I'm sure she will."

Ruldi tilted his head, looking towards the door. "Where is your friend tonight, my lord?"

"My friend?"

"The one with the silver hair."

Salix's heart stuttered. "They're not coming."

"Well, I'm sure I will see them tomorrow," Ruldi said, sinking back into his pillows.

"No, you won't," Salix replied bitterly.

"Why not?"

Because I am not worthy of their company. "They will be busy, Ruldi."

"Ah well. The day after then." Ruldi smiled, his eyes slipping dreamily closed. "They like you a great

deal, my lord. They promised they would take care of you for me. Once I am gone."

Salix swallowed back the truth that threatened to crawl from his lips. He stayed by Ruldi's bedside until dawn.

Two days later, Ruldi passed away in his sleep. Salix came to bring him his morning tea and found him there. There would be no more coughing, no more lost memories. Salix put the tea tray down beside the bed and wept.

The body was taken to the berth that had been prepared. Salix didn't know if Argenti had told the priests, or if they'd merely heard him shouting. Either way, he was grateful for the clean white sheet on the riverbank, ready to bear Ruldi away. He brought with him one last twig of his willow, enclosing it in the old man's hands before he gave the body over to the acolytes to do their work.

Now, he stood numbly on the bank as the acolytes performed the last rights of the city. He didn't suppose he had much longer to live himself: how long could the last vestiges of Ruldi's belief sustain him? Still, he could do his last worshipper this final kindness while he waited for his own end.

"I am sorry for your loss."

In a way, Salix had been expecting them. Still, he started when Argenti appeared beside him. They wore a long, dark robe edged in silver.

Salix turned away. All the anger he'd felt only a few days ago had melted into numbness, and some part of him was grateful for Argenti's presence. He didn't want to bear this burden alone. "I thank you," he murmured. "Ruldi was a good man. I hope you will carry him to the next world gently."

"I would do nothing else," Argenti replied.

They stood in silence together as the body slipped beneath the water. Salix swallowed against the tears in his throat. He had been there when Ruldi was born. He had watched the boy grow into a man, comforted him when his heart had been broken, and celebrated with him when his daughter spoke her first word. He had seen all the flaming brilliance of many human lives, and now the last he would ever know was gone.

Night drew on. Around them, the city grew bright with fires and lanterns. Shaking himself, Salix cast one last glance at the river before turning to Argenti. He bowed low, as befitted the god of the Silverlode.

"Thank you for your company," he said, voice muffled. "It has given me more joy than you will ever know. I wish I could say more, but this is the last you will see of me. My last worshipper is dead. I will follow him."

Salix spent the night beneath the willow in the courtyard, letting his tears fall freely. Argenti had not stopped him when he'd left, and he'd sat alone through the night, waiting for the last of Ruldi's

lingering belief to fade and take his life with it. He wondered how the end would feel when it came. He felt tired and old, but there was no numbness or loss of feeling, not yet at least.

Dawn's light was peeking over the horizon when he heard the splash. Opening his eyes, Salix saw Argenti standing by the riverbank. Their hair was dripping wet, water running down over the plain clothes they wore.

Salix looked away, the sight of them twisting painfully in his chest. "Please leave," he said, voice thick. "Perhaps you mean to comfort me, but I would be alone to meet my end."

"I meant what I said in the temple," they replied.

"That you were going to tell me?"

"That you know me better than anyone." They crossed the courtyard, coming to kneel before Salix. "Do you know why you could not find a temple to the god Argenti? It is because no one knows that name. It was my first name, my true name, but it has been all but lost. None know it now, save you." They looked up at the tree fondly, placing a hand on one of the trailing roots. Salix shuddered at the touch, closing his eyes.

"I used to stop beneath the branches of your willow, you know," Argenti said. "In the summer, the sun is so hot, but beneath your boughs it was always delightfully cool. I would hear your worshippers in the courtyard, playing and laughing and talking. In my temples, there are chants and prayers. But seldom is there laughter."

Salix let his eyes flutter open, finding Argenti watching him. "I never saw you."

"You would not have," Argenti replied. "I did not want you thinking I meant to steal your parishioners. The smaller gods I'd met were covetous, mean things. But not you. I saw you amongst them, always smiling, always giving. For three hundred years, I watched you as their numbers dwindled, as each mortal life was snuffed out until only one remained. And that day, the day I finally revealed myself to you ..." They trailed off, reaching out to put a hand to Salix's cheek. "You looked so lonely. So resigned. And I found I could not desert you."

Salix felt tears forming in the corners of his eyes. He tried to blink them away. "So now you've come to say goodbye?"

Argenti shook their head. "Not goodbye."

"But my last worshipper is dead."

"No," Argenti said, leaning forward. "No, they are not." With a question in their eyes, they pressed their lips to Salix's own. Salix shivered, tasting a thousand years of river and memories against his mouth. His own eyes slid closed, unbidden. And then, finally, he understood what Argenti had said.

He pulled away, hands trembling. "What are you saying?"

"I love you, Salix of the Willow," the god said, their voice unfaltering. "I will believe in you until the mountains crumble and the river runs dry. You have one worshipper left still." They took Salix's hands in their own, holding them tightly. "I will not let you fade."

Salix choked back a sob, squeezing his eyes shut. He leaned forward, letting his forehead fall against Argenti's own, feeling their steady hands around his. He didn't know if he wanted to cry or laugh, weep or sing. Months of preparing for his own end, of feeling loneliness growing around him like a shroud, lifted with those simple words. He'd heard them spoken before, but never for himself. No one loved gods. They worshipped them, feared them, prayed to them. But mortal love was too precious a feeling to be wasted on a god. Then again, there was nothing mortal about Argenti.

He squeezed their hands back. "I love you," he said. "Of course I love you. But I cannot be a god to you. I would not have you worship me. I would have you beside me, as you have been these past months." He opened his eyes, meeting Argenti's own.

The god of the Silverlode smiled. "Then beside you I will stay. I am not above you, nor you me." They pressed their lips against Salix's once more. "Let us find a different kind of worship."

J.C. PILLARD

J.C. is a queer writer from the mountains of Colorado. Her recent short fiction has been published in *Traveling Light: A Worldbuilding for Masochists Anthology*, *Metaphorosis*, *Abyss & Apex*, and *Penumbric*. When she's not writing, she knits, hikes with her partner and dog, and plays a lot of Dungeons and Dragons.

Q&A with J.C. Pillard

The following questions were posed by Amanda Fetters, author of *The Braided Lintel*, and are answered by J.C. Pillard about their story *A Different Kind of Worship*.

As I read about Salix's wanderings through Yemala and to the Silverlode, I thought about Moroccan streets, Grecian rooftops, and the Ganges River. It is a richly sensory reading experience, and I'd love to spend a day exploring with Salix and Argenti. It made me wonder: how do real-world places and existing human cultures inform your storytelling, both in this story and in your other works?

> I take a lot of inspiration from existing places and cultures. I have a document on my phone where I write interesting tidbits that come my way about history, folklore, architecture, etc., that could make its way into a story. For example, I have a setting in that document right

now of a city in the mountains where the sun never crests the peaks during winter—what an excellent setting! No story yet, but that will come later. A lot of times, a story idea is a confluence of a real-world place or concept combined with whatever themes I'm working on at the time.

In the case of Yemala, I was inspired by the many great rivers around the world that have acted as the central lifeblood for enormous cities and civilizations. The Ganges, the Nile, the Seine, the Tiber—all of these enormous rivers with instantly recognizable names. It also struck me how often a river features in stories of travel to the underworld—the Styx being the most well-known, at least in the west, but there are certainly others—and how odd it is that rivers both give life and bear it away. What a strange and beautiful thing it must be to be a river.

From the very beginning, your story has such a warm, wonderful sense of "yes-and" energy. Yes, Salix grieves for Ruldi, and he allows space for his own private grief—yet he seems to make a healthy distinction between the two. One doesn't have to replace or dominate the other; they both simply are. It would have been a very different story if Salix had insisted on making anyone's grief into an "either-or" situation. Can you talk a little bit about your thoughts on inviting that "yes-and" approach into

highly emotional stories (whether on the page or in real life)?

> When you're the sole writer of a story, you are the arbiter of what happens—but, of course, that's only true in theory. The more I write, the more I've come to realize that stories have a natural course to them—a little like a river themselves, following a natural riverbed. As a writer, you can tweak here and there, pulling the stream gently one way and then the other, but ultimately the story is going to tell itself the way it wants to be told. That often means holding contradictions and multitudes, acknowledging that things are complicated, understanding that not everything can be solved.
>
> I think it's valuable for everyone to understand that having complex or even contradictory feelings is normal. You can love someone and hate them. You can grieve someone's death and feel relief. In Salix's case, you can mourn your friend and also mourn the loss of yourself—each thing informs the other. When you invite in the contradictions and the complexities and allow yourself to explore each one, I think it leads to richer stories, and hopefully a richer life as well.

There are a lot of ideas in this story that we could talk about: hope in the face of despair, the universality of grief, and the proper use of power all come to mind. What ideas do you continually return

to in your work as a writer, and which of those ideas are reflected in "A Different Kind of Worship"? Why are those ideas important to you?

> I spend a lot of my writing thinking about death (of various kinds) and how it impacts us. Grief is a thread that runs strongly through a lot of my works—not just grief from literal death, but grief from metaphorical death. Mourning a future that's out of reach or a past that's irredeemable. In "A Different Kind of Worship," I wanted a more hopeful look at grief through community and love. It sounds silly, but I really do believe that love is one of the most redemptive qualities of humanity, and I believe grief and love are two sides of the same coin. I adore that line from Wandavision, "What is grief if not love persevering," and I wanted to tell a story where both happen at once. To return to your earlier question, I wanted to "yes, and" the experience of losing a loved one but learning there is still more to be found in the future.

Finally, what do you hope readers will carry with them when they finish this story?

> I hope they will carry Salix's compassion and Argenti's understanding. These two could have turned away from each other, but they choose not to. Salix especially could have closed down and shut the world out, but instead he is vulnerable, he lets someone in, he admits that

he's in pain. And Argenti acknowledges that there's nothing they can do but listen. Sometimes, simply listening is the most powerful thing you can do for another person.

The Washing Witch

By Erin Keating

The uneven clack of boots over river rock tumbled into Gwen's dreams. In the six months since she began her apprenticeship, Gwen had learned to sleep like down: warm and light. A good washing witch expects visitors at all hours—stains do not rest, and neither does she.

"I've got it!" She darted past Agnes's door to meet their customer. Agnes, her teacher, grumbled something in reply. Agnes's few words were always grumbled—it had made learning the craft rather difficult, yet Gwen had managed.

Dawn swathed the wooded riverbank in gauzy light. The iridescent soap bubbles spouting from their chimney drifted off on the cool spring breeze. This was Gwen's favorite part of her craft: the anticipation of a customer rounding the last bend in the path, the look on their face when they took in the charming thatch roof and clay walls grown over with silver lace vine.

This customer arrived, as all the others did, with a hamper of laundry perched precariously on her hip. But she did not look at the cozy house with its vines and soap bubbles. She looked only at Gwen.

"Mom?" Gwen whispered.

Her mom, Elin Hart, the hardest working hedge witch for seven counties, was *here*.

"I hope I'm not too early." Elin's one-volume voice startled cooing mourning doves from their perch.

"No—no—it's never too early. I can take that for you." Gwen reached for the hamper, but Elin pulled it back.

"Oh sweetheart, I'm fine. Don't bother with me."

"Please, this is my craft." Gwen snatched at the hamper.

"And I'm your mom, I can manage." Elin sidestepped her reach again.

Back and forth they danced, as through gritted teeth Gwen insisted, "Let. Me. Do. My. Work—aha!"

Gwen yanked the hamper from Elin's grip, righting it before dirty socks could spill all over the river rocks.

"Now, where were we?" Gwen panted as she led Elin up the path. With the familiar weight of the hamper on her hip, Gwen remembered her script: *Good morning. Was your journey difficult? You must be tired. Let us help.* But her words stilted on her tongue. What was there to say to someone Gwen had disappointed so thoroughly?

For every task to be done, there is a witch to do it.

Hedge witches, beneath their wide straw hats, coaxed trees to shade weary travelers or halted berry brambles before they overtook the lanes. Healing witches, in their stiff black uniforms, applied cooling salves in sick rooms or coached women on their birthing chairs. Divination witches, with their thick spectacles, studied the future in the lines of worn palms and the patterns of the stars.

Every witch in the county assumed that Gwen would apprentice under her mom—after all, there was no better hedge witch than Elin Hart. But Gwen had chosen to study washing witchery.

"It will be thankless," her mom had said when Gwen signed her apprenticeship contract: a year of training, room, and board provided by a master of that craft. Now, her mom did not say anything.

In the little foyer, Gwen would usually instruct a customer in a voice certain and easy, "Take your boots off. Stay awhile." But to Elin she said, "Will you be staying long?"

Agnes drew back the gaudy paisley curtain that separated the foyer from the washroom. Gwen's teacher was as tall as a woman could be without a trace of giant lineage. Her height and broad shoulders took up the whole doorframe. She startled first-time customers, and Gwen felt Elin tense beside her. Yet, Agnes was everything a good washing witch should be: arms roped with muscle, humidity-frizzed hair piled in a knot upon her head, her pants and sleeves rolled up for work. If a washing witch does not roll up her pants and sleeves, then she is a charlatan, and her clients had best take their business elsewhere.

"Mistress Hart," Agnes nodded at the clear resemblance between Gwen and her mom. "No charge for family."

"Oh no, please, don't bother with—"

Gwen jabbed an elbow into Elin's side. "A good washing witch never haggles."

"Very well. That's too kind, thank you."

Agnes grumbled something as she stepped aside to reveal the washroom. Actually, *this* was Gwen's favorite part of her craft: the washroom so thick with steam she couldn't see through it. And then, the steam parted just enough to reveal a dreamy haze. The bronze spouts poured hot water that smelled of lilies and lotus. The deep basin, lined with mother-of-pearl, cast opalescent light throughout the room. Even in her six months of apprenticeship, Gwen had not yet learned how this closed space was so bright. No doubt, Agnes would grumble the secret eventually.

As they stood at the edge of the pool, Gwen watched as Elin's taut shoulders dropped one notch, then two, then sank down away from her ears. Sweat beaded on her mom's hairline. "I can take your coat," Gwen gestured to the hook on the wall. Elin waved her off and hung up the coat herself.

Agnes took Elin's laundry into the water as Gwen rolled up her pants and sleeves. Agnes grumbled; Gwen translated.

"She invites you to soak your feet while we work."

"Is that required for the ritual?"

"No, but it's strongly recommended."

Cautiously, Elin peeled off her socks and sat at the edge of the pool. Her bare feet traced small circles through the fragrant water. The easy, almost childish, motion jarred Gwen. Elin Hart, the great hedge witch, wore routine like a boned corset; she cast aside extraneous movement or unproductive activities like scraps of old fabric. Today's washing was free, but how much had it cost her mom to break from routine to visit?

Gwen couldn't dwell on that now. Not when there was magic to be done. Really, *this* was Gwen's favorite part of her craft: from bottles that bobbed in the pool, she and Agnes poured their concoctions, working them into the fabric with water-wrinkled hands. Inky soapsuds smelling of the night sky softened underclothes so that they'd flutter light as a breeze against flushed skin. A thick green paste, bitter and earthen-scented, toughened work clothes so that the fabric never faded or ripped.

There was a rhythm to the washing—a splash, splash, swish, that Gwen had perfected over the last six months. Water burbled from the spout in a steady drone. When she glanced at the edge of the pool, her mom's head drooped against her shoulder, and her eyes were closed.

When the washing was done, Agnes grumbled, "I'll take this outside to dry. You see if anything else needs care."

"That was all she brought—"

But Agnes gave her a pointed look and jerked her chin toward Elin. Through the steam, Gwen saw her mom the way Agnes did: purple circles stained

beneath her eyes; deep creases of worry wrinkled her brow; cracked skin tore over her knuckles and fingertips. Had her mom—with her loud voice, and her "I'm fine," and her boundless energy as she moved from task to task to task—always looked so tired?

"Mom?" Gwen nudged her shoulder.

"Huh—what—are you done already?" Elin asked in her one-volume voice.

"Would you like to soak for a little while?" Gwen asked.

"Is that part of the ritual too?"

"No." Gwen shrugged. "But it's something I'd like to do for you."

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm fine. Don't bother with me—"

But Gwen cut her the impatient look that she'd so often earned as a child: the look of *I am your mother, and what I say goes.* It was strange how natural that mask felt on her own face.

Elin laughed, raw and loud. It echoed off the smooth walls of the washroom until she was a whole chorus of laughter. Gwen had never seen her mom so—so *unlaced*—before. Her head thrown back, hands clutching her aching ribs, tears spilling down her cheeks as she cackled like witches were said to do in wild places that didn't have witches of their own. When her mom collected herself with hiccupping gasps, the tears still fell.

"Oh, sweetheart, when did you get so old?"

Elin let Gwen fold her clothes after she'd undressed. She walked into the water—dutifully at

first, one step, then the next. But by the third step, she let out a long sigh and sank down among the scent of lily and lotus. The water was the kind of warmth that blurred the edges of the body. The very first time Gwen had stepped into the basin, she'd remembered the sensation of her mom's enveloping hugs when she had been little.

Gwen worked her magic again. Her deft fingers scrubbed away the stains and wrinkles and tears with soap that hinted of iron. She massaged her mom's scalp with cold, minty oil to rinse out the worry and exhaustion.

Elin was quiet, letting Gwen focus on her work. But when she did finally speak, it was in the softest voice Gwen had ever heard. "I know you think that I didn't want you to become a washing witch, but that's not true."

Gwen rubbed lavender and chamomile lotion into her mom's cracked hands. She didn't say anything—not yet. A good washing witch knows how to listen.

"I didn't want you to become a witch at all. It's impossible, being expected to take care of everyone all the time. Who will take care of you?"

Gwen recalled the home that she hadn't seen in six months: timber and plaster and bursting with people. Her parents, all four grandparents, her two younger siblings, and Gwen had vied for space beneath the slanted eaves. Her mom, returning home from her work dirt-covered and bramble-pricked, had tended to each of them in turn, and then done the cooking, the cleaning, the washing, the mending. Last to sleep and first to rise, she had kept their little

world spinning. Anytime Gwen asked if she could help, her mom always replied, "Oh, sweetheart, I'm fine. Don't bother with me."

For the last six months, Gwen had stitched up the guilt of disappointing her mom with the joy she'd found in her craft. But her mom hadn't been disappointed at all. She'd simply been worried.

Gwen kissed the top of Elin's wet hair. "Agnes will take care of me. And I'll take care of her. And one day, I'll have my own apprentice, and we'll take care of each other. And I'll take care of you too, if you let me."

Elin emerged from the water with satin-smooth skin. Gwen wrapped her in a fluffy towel, like Elin used to do for her. When Elin was dried and dressed, she hugged Gwen so tightly her arms shook. Gwen breathed in the scent of lily and lotus, and beneath that, notes of earth and petrichor that clung to all of Gwen's memories of her mom.

"Agnes will bring your laundry in from the line shortly," Gwen said.

"Laundry ..." Elin murmured.

"Yes, laundry—the whole purpose of this errand."

"Oh, sweetheart." Elin patted Gwen's cheek with smooth, strong hands. "I came to see you."

At the door, Agnes presented Elin with her hamper, folded with cloud-soft clothes. Her tone was cheery as she grumbled, "See you soon."

Gwen had expected the familiar chorus of "I'm fine, don't bother," but instead Elin beamed. "How about a week from today?"

Gwen grinned. "You won't even need to knock."

This was Gwen's favorite part of her craft: her mom, silhouetted by rosy sunrise, iridescent bubbles swirling around her hair. At the bend in the road, she turned back and with her loudest voice called out.

"Gwen, you are a very good washing witch!"

ERIN KEATING

Erin Keating is a New Jersey-based writer, who at any given time is writing either cozy fantasy or body horror—she has given up trying to figure out what that says about her psyche. Her cozy fantasy work has previously appeared in *Hearth Stories*, *Luna Station Quarterly*, and *Wyngraf*. When she's not reading or writing, she's dabbling in whichever hobby has most recently caught her attention.

Q&A with Erin Keating

The following questions were posed by Alicia Adams, author of *To the Scribe Who Reads This*, and are answered by Erin Keating about their story *The Washing Witch*.

In all three of your *Hearth Stories* ("Springtime Fair" included!), your focus is on strong character relationships getting even stronger—lifelong friends, friends-turned-lovers, and now a mother-daughter relationship. So my thought is that the concepts must have started there, with the characters and relationships. But it can't be that, because your settings in each case are so cool!

I love how well you've captured the sensory joys of laundry—the world's greatest chore. The iridescent bubbles, the smells, the warmth and softness.

When this story was forming in your mind, did it start with the idea of a laundry witch apprenticeship,

or did it start with the mother-daughter relationship? How did those two ideas come together?

> This story began as an exercise to write something my mom would enjoy. On Mother's Day a couple of years ago, my mom was reminiscing about the stories I'd written for her as presents when I was little, and I found myself wanting to do that again. At the time, I'd been writing a series of dark, fairytale-inspired stories, and, while I loved them, I wanted to wrap myself up in a cozy tale for a while. My mom loves a happy ending, so I wanted to write something that I could share with her without any caveats or words of warning.
>
> Separately, I'd been working through the idea of a washing witch. The line, "For every job to be done, there is a witch to do it," had fallen into my head, and I'd been musing on what some unusual kinds of witchcraft might look like. There really is nothing so magical as falling into freshly cleaned sheets, and so the idea of a laundry witch took root. That idea seemed like the perfect avenue to write this story for my mom, who I believe is as close as our world has to a washing witch.

There's such an emphasis on caregiving in your story, with all the joy and fatigue that comes with that. I don't know if witches are all women in your world, but I really like that this story focuses on women both as the purveyors and receivers of care.

Is this something you've explored in your other works?

> One thing that I learned after moving out of my parents' house and getting married is that it doesn't matter how independent I am or how many "adult" milestones I clear, I will always be my parents' child. My mom will always offer to help me in my garden, my dad will always offer to fix a leaky pipe, and I will always head home from their house with enough leftovers to last me a week.
>
> They have so much care to give—to me, my younger siblings, and to their own parents—but so rarely ask for help themselves. *Who takes care of the caretakers* has been an ongoing refrain in my head, and it's something I've begun to meditate on in recent short stories.
>
> In my story, "Grief in C Minor," published in *Luna Station Quarterly*, a granddaughter tries to understand her estranged relationship with her grandmother while restoring her recently inherited, sentient house. And in "Covenant of Salt," forthcoming in *Tales & Feathers*, a lonely lighthouse keeper takes in a ghost spit out by the sea.
>
> I think this is the first time I've explored this question without bothering any ghosts! But I don't think my exploration of this question is anywhere near finished.

I love Agnes. Such a grumbly and initially intimidating character, but she's soft and perceptive.

Where did Agnes come from? What influenced how you shaped her character?

> Thank you for all the love for Agnes! She was such a joy for me to discover, because she wasn't in the first draft at all! Originally, this story was written in second person with "you" bringing laundry to an unnamed washing witch. I had gotten some feedback that folks wanted more characterization from the witch. As I tried to think about how I'd develop the washing witch into a character in her own right, I thought, "How does one become a washing witch, anyway?" And Gwen's apprenticeship was born!
>
> I drew a lot of inspiration for Agnes from my maternal grandfather. My Poppy is 97, a man of few words, and shows his love through his actions. He often knows what you need before you know yourself. That said, he has perfected a glare that still makes my dad trip over himself, despite my parents being married more than 30 years.

I love the refrain of Gwen telling the reader the favorite part of her craft and each time it is a different thing. Gwen's craft is clearly such a gift to those who experience it and such a beautiful thing to share with those close to her. It's hard not to see the parallels with writing, and this story was such a gift and such a comfort to me (thank you).

Do you have favorite things about your craft (writing or otherwise) that you feel comfortable sharing?

Thank you so much for sharing that! I found comfort in writing it, so it means the world to know that reading it gave you comfort too.

I'm very much like Gwen in that there are countless things I love about my craft, so here are a few, in no particular order:

—The ritual of beginning a new story, handwritten in a notebook with a glass pen and bottle of ink.

—The satisfaction of reading the first draft and realizing that some parts are not only usable, but occasionally quite lovely.

—The delight when a character does something I hadn't expected, and the story begins to take on a life of its own.

—The little swell of pride when my husband, bound by law and holy matrimony to be my first reader on all my short stories, says, "I liked it. It was good."

—The buzzing anticipation of a single line or image that I know is the beginning of a new story.

The Braided Lintel

By Amanda Fetters

Raising the lantern would do nothing to reveal the stranger singing through the thick gloom, I knew, but I raised it all the same. Its light reflected off the fog, creating a halo around me as I descended the grassy slope, the crash of the waves on the cliffs behind me growing fainter as I walked closer to the sound of the voice singing, tiny bells jangling in its wake.

It was this song that lured me to the hillside, curling its tendrils round my ankles like cats made of fog, coaxing me from my spinning wheel where I pressed the treadle and absently fed the clean wool into the spindle to the gentle whirr and clack of the wheel. I hardly remembered lighting the lantern or carrying it outside into the gathering gloom, where any lost spirit might snatch me away, and there would be no tale to tell about it, for Mother told no tales. Not anymore.

The song was a contradiction: ghostly solid, spine-chilling in its blanket warmth. I fancied I could see it

wafting in multihued ribbons through the shredding mist, braiding into patterns that formed one instant and broke the next, luring, inviting—so perhaps that's why I lifted my lantern despite its uselessness. I was beckoning the song to myself.

A shape took form, lumbering up the hill, and until it spoke, I wasn't sure whether the shape was man or woman, old or young. But then a sonorous contralto voice, its timbre rich and full, called, "Good even and even good, and praise be for the light!"

Solid and wide, swathed in robes of infinite patchwork in every conceivable color, the minnadour stepped into the light, smiling broadly, though I saw the exhaustion about her eyes plain enough.

"Well met," I said, extending my hand in greeting, hesitating only a moment in my astonishment. No minnadour had visited us since I was a child, but tales of their haunting songs, roofed wooden wagons, and intricate robes are favorites of the young—and the slightly less young—in these hills.

The stranger returned my handclasp; her voice was open and generous. "I thank you. I am Petrana, a minnadour of the king's city. Might you spare a weaving for my tale?" Her question, a touchstone in any story of the minnadours, was the traditional request for lodging among her people.

"It would be my honor," I replied, perhaps a little too quickly, for human company is hard to come by in these hills, much less such storied company as a living, breathing minnadour. I gestured with the lamp

in what I hoped was a friendly way towards the stone cottage where I live with my mother.

The house came to us through Mother's family. Her father didn't build it, nor did his parents, nor the mothers before them, but somewhere among those distant ancestors, someone, somewhere, brought a flock of sheep to these green hills at the precipice of our tall, straight ocean cliffs, saw that they were good, and decided to stay.

Stone by stone, our ancestors built these walls, planted the roof with sod, brought in a heavy oaken door from land-knows-where, and generation by generation, filled in the gaps and added a proper stove and wedged tiny panes of glass into the narrow windows. Legend has it that my great-grandfather was at last persuaded to marry my great-grandmother because her dowry included a bucket of bright red paint. Our door has been that color ever since.

The lintel over that bright red door is carved with a braid of intricate knots in the same design Mother taught me to knit when I was young. She didn't know who carved the lintel, nor did her mother, but the looping, braiding pattern, soft yet strong, has been part of the fabric of our family from time immemorial. My fingers know the design so well that I can knit it into a sweater or sock or shawl without looking. Over and under, around and through; it is carved into my very bones.

A great fountain of petunias, planted by some long-ago forebear, billows over the carved lintel in summer, and in winter the rains turn the roof-sod lush and waving, the color of a thousand thousand

emeralds seen through the end of a new-blown bottle of green glass.

Pentrana pushed back her bowl with a sigh of satisfaction. Her magnificent multihued cloak, hanging on a peg at the hearth, glowed in the firelight. Rich, jewel-colored velvets and luxuriant silks joined with scraps of homespun linen and hand-knit woolen squares in bright, decorative stitches. My eyes wandered among the zig-zags and straight lines, embroidered flowers and whorls, insects and birds all stitched together, and I longed to ask for the story behind each patch.

"Have you a family?" I asked, choosing a safer, less complicated question. I blew on another spoonful of broth before pressing it to Mother's mouth. She accepted it with trembling lips; a little broth dribbled down her chin.

Petrana put down her water cup and smiled. "I do, and at times we travel together, but this is a time of much-needed solitude for me."

I must have looked puzzled, for she continued, in patient explanation, "Some seasons are for the minnadour road, and others are for tending to the young and caring for the old." She nodded towards Mother. "It seems you're in a season of caring of your own."

Mother gave no sign of understanding. "She's quite lost her hearing," I explained in an unnecessary undertone, briefly wondering how much I ought to

share with the stranger. "Her hands still know how to card and spin and knit, and she can still make her way from bed to chair each day, but she's forgotten how to do much else." I patted Mother's mouth with a cloth and set the bowl on the table. Petrana tilted her head slightly, waiting.

The silence stretched between us, and the blunt ache in my chest, its edges sanded and smoothed by years of loneliness, felt like it, too, was stretching—growing brittle and thin, threatening to break under the weight of its burden. My eyes met Petrana's. "If I don't feed her, she won't eat. She wanders sometimes, in the night, searching and calling for her mother as though she were a sleepwalking child." I looked at my hands. "Sometimes I wonder how much longer she'll know me. Or if she still does, even now. She hasn't said my name in a long while, but—" I struggled to continue. "But sometimes she calls me Mother."

Petrana nodded and remained quiet for a moment. "I understand better than I'd wish to. In old age, we go back to the tasks our hands know best, even when our minds forget the more precious things." Her sympathetic gaze held mine for a moment. After another pause, she slapped her knees lightly and stood with a grunt of effort. "Now, who's for a tale?"

The fog outside obscured all sense of time, and grew ever thicker as night fastened in. I fed the turf

fire, earthy and fragrant, and laid a gentle hand on Mother's cheek, her skin loose and thin under my palm. She said nothing, but gave a faint smile as she sat in her chair next to the hearth, steadily carding raw wool into tight, fleecy rolls, ready to be spun into yarn. The wire teeth on the wooden paddles scritch-scratched rhythmically as the fibers gave up their tangles, tiny bits of dirt loosening and falling to the cloth on her lap, and a fleeting fancy filled me that I could somehow comb through the knotted fibers of her mind, loosening the forgetfulness and untangling the confusion until she, too, was ready to be spun and knit into something soft and safe and warm.

Petrana hummed a ghostly tune, barely audible at first—an unknown, meandering melody that leaped and fell in haunting minor keys, its wordless song gathering strength, invoking unbidden images of distant lands and peculiar people, rolling wheels and wandering feet, far forests and fields where strange flowers bloomed.

Mother's hands continued their work, oblivious to the music, the rasp of the teeth and gentle clack of the paddles adding an irregular cadence to Petrana's song. I winced, worried that it would interfere with her singing, but the minnadour stilled me with a subtle gesture; she listened, still singing, and made a graceful gathering motion with her hands, as though pulling the rhythm of the carders into her chest, weaving the sounds until the rasp-and-clack flowed into the music, and it sounded as though Petrana had asked Mother to accompany her from the beginning.

Petrana's humming rounded and opened into soulful, yearning vowels, drawn out in longing and passion, and I fancied she was parting the curtain of time, peering back and back into the long hall of my mother's grandmothers, far beyond the named generations to shadowed ancestors beyond. I shut my eyes, trying to imagine their faces, and allowed the nameless song to roll over my body in waves of wordless wonder, breaking against the cliffs of my loneliness, carrying me to an ocean of waking dreams.

Words took shape in Petrana's song, her story coming into far-off focus, like hills on the horizon seen through a swiftly lifting fog. I understood, distantly, that it was a story about a king who courted a peasant girl's affections by planting for her a magnificent garden.

I heard the story, but even as the tale unfolded from Petrana's lips, some different, other story began unfolding in my heart—quiet, so quiet—its plot difficult to tell, delicate and bold as summer peonies, in a voice that at first seemed like one woman's—Petrana's, perhaps—but that I soon understood to be a powerful unison of many.

It was—the knowledge exploded into my understanding with instant certainty—my mother-ancestors singing out to me: together, as one, braiding cords, soft and strong, over and under, around and through, anchoring me to all their rooted reassurance, all their unyielding power, all their inviolable love. For a long while, it was a feeling that had no words; when the words came, they only gave voice to what I already knew in my heart.

All will be well, they sang, *all will be well.*

My breath caught; had Petrana sung those words? My eyes snapped open but found her still singing of the king and his garden, though her voice sounded far away, under the ocean waters, nearly out of hearing.

The mother-ancestor voices wrapped around my shoulders with invisible weight—not heavy or burdensome—but swaddling me with a thickness of love that I felt I might reach out and gather into my very soul if only I could catch hold of its warp and weft. I felt cradled, held, watched over. Safe.

You are not alone, they sang, their words a lullaby and a promise.

We are here with you.

We are here with you.

All will be well.

Petrana might have sung all night or only for an hour, but I willingly would have sat and listened until the end of time, my breath turning to vapor and my bones crumbling to dust, if it had only meant that I could bathe in this warm sea of mother-wisdom, its gentle currents bearing me aloft on its soul-filling melody, forever.

The song must have been over for some time when I belatedly realized I'd been sitting straight up, my brow creased in concentration, chin raised, as though listening to some distant sound. It felt like surfacing from a dream, and I wanted nothing more than to catch hold of its fleecy tail and melt back into sleep.

My confused gaze found Mother in the ensuing silence. Her hands lay still, the wooden paddles

resting on her lap, her clouded eyes, looking directly into mine, shining with unshed tears.

Words felt hollow—applause unthinkable—so we sat, instead, in a sacred kind of quiet, basking in the shimmer of stillness that coated every surface, smoothed every corner, kissed every brow. Mother drifted into sleep, her hands folded, a girlish smile hidden just behind the pucker of her lips.

Petrana stayed a fortnight. She helped me with my tasks, sweeping the hearth and washing the linens and tending to Mother, and her life braided into ours with utmost ease until I remembered, always unpleasantly, that she would, at some point, leave.

At night, we sat with Mother near the fragrant fire, me with my knitting and Petrana mending her cloak, the two of us bantering and swapping stories—sometimes sentimental, sometimes bawdy—that made us cackle with a kind of glee and shared understanding that only women of a certain age can know.

I began to accept that my name was lost to Mother. With Petrana there—and the words of my mother-ancestors fresh in my heart—the loss felt almost bearable. And if she saw her own mother's crinkled smile in the lines of my face or heard her strong, sure tone in the sound of my voice, so much the better. I could not begrudge her that comfort.

Petrana sometimes sang tales as she did on that first night; despite my eager ears, straining to hear the

voices of my forebears once more, I heard no more hidden stories in the undercurrent of her songs.

I tucked their memory away behind a sheltered cove inside my heart.

The day came, as I knew it would, that Petrana returned to the road.

"I have more tales to tell, more songs to sing," she said, her voice filled with warmth. She folded me into her arms and hugged me tight, and I tried to fix the moment in my memory: the feeling of being embraced; of a kind, affectionate touch; of the intentional, loving closeness of another human being.

In the midst of the embrace, an echo sounded in my mind, unheralded and unlooked for, steady as a heartbeat, singing to the hiss and roar of the ocean waves crashing on the cliffs below:

We are here, we are here.

Not alone, not alone.

The song reverberated in my chest, curling over my shoulder blades, weaving through my ribcage, wrapping me in its promise, and my heart sang back to my mothers with a sudden, silent thrill of hope.

Petrana released me, smiling in a kindly way. I took a shuddering breath, steadying myself as I wiped tears from my face, and pulled a square of snowy wool from my pocket.

"A weaving for your tale, as agreed." I pressed it into her hands, its fibers cleverly knit in the pattern of my ancestors: an intricate braid, turning and weaving, soft and strong. Petrana's fingers traced the square reverently; her amber eyes were bright when they met mine. We embraced again, quicker this time.

I stood rooted to the spot and watched Petrana's ox lumber away, the mist enveloping her brightly painted wagon until the diminishing tinkle of bells, too, grew faint and was lost.

The ocean sounded in its relentless rhythm in the distance, the breeze sharp and saline in my nostrils. The grass on the hillside was long, ready for the sheep to graze; it left a wide ribbon of damp at the bottom of my skirts as I made my way back to the cottage. I trailed my hands in the stems, washing them in the fresh morning dew.

When I reached the house, I paused and touched the carved wooden lintel, running my fingers over the braided knots carved into the wood, worn smooth by time, over and under, around and through. A keepsake of their reassurance, an anchor to their power. A token of their love.

I went inside.

AMANDA FETTERS

Amanda Fetters is an emerging speculative fiction writer. She loves stories that span the range of shared human experiences in surprising, hopeful ways. She is a fifth-generation Californian living in Louisiana, where she teaches college writing. You can find her on Threads and Instagram at amanda_fetters_writes.

Q&A with Amanda Fetters

The following questions were posed by J.C. Pillard, author of *A Different Kind of Worship*, and are answered by Amanda Fetters about their story *The Braided Lintel.*

The main character is a fiber artist—spinning, weaving, and knitting most of all. Why was it important to you to have your main character be a knitter? Are you a knitter yourself, and how do you see that impacting your storytelling?

> I learned to knit from a coworker during college. I had a blissful year of knitting before I developed a nasty case of tendinitis and had to stop. I'm still heartbroken about it! These days, I'm more of a wannabe knitter—I follow tons of fiber artists on social media and love seeing their gorgeous creations. Knitting, like so many other traditional skills, makes me feel connected to my ancestors. It's something I bet they'd all recognize, and I like to imagine sitting with all

my great-great-grandmothers, admiring each others' patterns and swapping stories, a lot like Petrana and the story's narrator.

Where did you get the word "minnadour"? Do you think the minnadour in the story ever comes back to the cottage by the sea?

"Minnadour" happened one day when I tried smashing together "minstrel" and "troubadour." It felt fitting for Petrana, and I very much want to find out more about where she came from and where she's going.

What inspired you to use a cabled, braided motif for the family?

While writing this story, I kept thinking about Irish landscapes, history, and culture. I don't have any Irish heritage that I know of, but I visited once and absolutely loved it. I think Celtic knots are beautiful, and I felt it was a fitting symbol for the narrator's interconnectedness with her ancestors.

When do you write most often and where?

I like to write in the morning at my kitchen table. It's next to a big window that looks out on fern-covered live oaks. Keeping regular writing hours during summer is challenging because my four kids are out of school, so I keep a little notebook in my bag. That way, I can jot down ideas no matter when or where they happen.

To the Scribe Who Reads This

By Alicia Adams

This story is the fourth installment of an ongoing series of interrelated stories that is being serialized by Hearth Stories, beginning with "Dandelion" in Issue One.

Your sister has had a baby, Ivy scrawled onto thick paper as the older woman dictated. *She is healthy. Her name is Daisy.* Ivy sat at her desk in the front room of her underground house, nestled between the roots of a quaking aspen tree, and waited for the woman to continue. When the silence stretched a little too long, Ivy said, "Would you like to add anything else?"

"Like what?" the woman asked. She paced backlit beside the only window.

"Well, you can say anything. What would you like to tell your son?"

"In a letter?" The woman, Mallow was her name, chewed at her nails, as if the very idea of writing a letter made her anxious.

"Yes. Whatever I write here, the scribe in his town can read to him. You can say anything you want."

"Okay. How about, 'I hope you are alive and that you are in good health'?"

"Yes, okay." Ivy dipped her glass pen into the jar of ink that her apprentice Poppy had collected from shaggy mane inky cap mushrooms earlier that day. She added the new sentence to the letter. "Would you like to tell him anything about you and your family here? Maybe catch him up on how you all are doing?"

"Oh. Hm. Okay, how about this: 'We are doing fine. Your father hewed a new bedroom in the trunk of the oak tree. Your sister is busy with the baby.'"

Ivy added these new sentences to the letter. "This is great. I'm sure he'll be happy to hear that."

Mallow stepped out from the window light, and Ivy saw the nervous grin on her face as she absentmindedly braided her long, brown hair. "Do you think maybe he'll come home to see the new baby?"

"You can ask him."

"Yes, ask him! See if he'll come home."

Ivy wrote, *We hope that you can come home and meet your new niece.* She said, "I'm thinking of ending the letter 'With love, your mother Mallow.' Do you like that, or would you want something different?"

"That's great," Mallow said. "How long will it take to reach him?"

"No one can really say," Poppy, the apprentice, jumped in. She knew Ivy hated this part. "If no one wants to take him the letter directly, then we'll have

to wait for a traveler headed that way. There's no way to tell how long that could be."

"Okay," Mallow said, her smile waning. "Hopefully someone will come soon."

"Yes, hopefully," Ivy offered.

Mallow walked up the clay stairs to the door, taking one last look at the letter, as if at any moment it might turn into a response from her son. When its only response was stubborn silence, she stepped up out of the door and closed it behind her.

Ivy motioned Poppy closer. "Once a letter is complete, we add a few more things to it. Come, take a seat."

Poppy pulled a chair up next to Ivy.

"On the outside of the letter, we put an address. Since most people can't read, we draw a picture." Ivy dipped the pen into the ink. "At the top left, we draw a picture of the recipient's name." Ivy drew a cluster of small berries surrounded by small pointed leaves.

"Huckleberry," Poppy said.

"That's right. Now anyone will know who the letter is for. Below that I draw a map of where he lives." Ivy drew trees of a forest emptying out into a clearing. She drew a house, a barn, a chicken coop, and a corral full of horses.

"That's the next farm over. The farm with the horses."

"That's right. And now on the right we draw the name of the person sending the letter." Ivy drew broad leaves and small flowers for Mallow. "On a new page, we can add news from our own people. It's helpful to share news between settlements." Ivy pulled out a clean sheet of paper and read aloud as she wrote the list:

—*We lost three trees in the storm, though no homes were hurt and no one injured.*

—*An apple tree was found not far away, and small apples have bent the branches almost to the ground.*

—*Our physician, Rosemary, has taken an apprentice, Hollyhock.*

—*Clover has been chosen once again as story master for this year's festival. All are welcome to attend. Included is a transcript of Clover's story from last year, "The Wind and the Wayward Traveler," as transcribed by the scribe's apprentice, Poppy.*

"*I'm* transcribing the story?" Poppy asked. She pushed the red hair out of her face and looked up, startled.

"You're ready," Ivy said. "I took the story down myself. All you have to do is make a copy so we can share it with the folk at Farm with Horses. It may be they like it so much they perform it for their own festival."

"I just copy it?"

"One letter at a time. You're ready."

Poppy nodded but her complexion went green behind her freckles. "Right. I can try at least. What are you writing now?"

Ivy looked up, cheeks flushed. "Oh, nothing important. I like to add a note for the scribe who will read the letter. It makes me feel connected to the other scribes."

"What does it say?"

"You'll have to wait until you can read it yourself."

Poppy grabbed the letter and transcribed the last part onto some scrap paper to decipher later. Some day she knew she'd be able to read at just a glance the way Ivy did, but for now what she liked about reading was the mystery of it. A page full of symbols, decoded letter by letter, could unveil a whole story. A letter received from a traveler could reveal things that had happened across the world. The books in Ivy's front room could open up the mysteries of the past. It was only the scribes who could tell these things, and Poppy was on her way to becoming one.

"Have you met any of the other scribes?" Poppy asked.

"My own mentor, Chive. And you. So that's two."

"Is that all? Where is Chive now?"

"Once you train your apprentice," Ivy said, "you're free to go where you please. The young scribes like you and I are stationed in a settlement. Once there's a scribe to take your place, you're free to travel. Chive left to be a wandering scribe. She

might make her way back some day. Many of the scribes make it back to be buried beside the aspen."

Ivy looked out the window at all the plants growing there. "And I've read through all the scribe journals, as you will too someday. It feels like you've met them when you've read their journals."

"But you haven't really," Poppy said.

"You're right. It's lonely to be a scribe. I want to prepare you for that now."

Poppy shook her head. "But you don't have to be friends with just scribes, Ivy. You can be friends with anyone."

Ivy stood up and stretched her back. She kept her eyes on the small plants tangling together beside the aspen roots. Ladybugs clambered along the leaves. "Of course you can be friends with anyone," she said at last. "But you become a different person when you learn to read. You learn about different worlds. You grow a curiosity that can't ever be satisfied. And no one you know is like that. You can be alone even surrounded by other folk."

It was only a few days before a traveling party came through on their way out of town—two older folk with short gray hair and accents that were difficult to understand. It had taken almost as many days for Poppy to finish her transcription of "The Wind and the Wayward Traveler."

Ivy folded the transcript into the stack of papers that contained the letter, the news, and the recipient

address and set it on top of the other letters going out. She told the travelers where each letter was going, who should receive them, and what they were about. Some letters would make it all the way to their destinations with these folk. Some would only make it part of the way on their long journeys, but the scribes in other towns knew to hold on to them and to pass them along when another traveler came, going in the right direction.

Poppy was surprised by the sadness she felt letting her transcript leave the house. *All that work*, she thought, *gone forever.*

The water Poppy used to make paper was always cold, no matter the season. After making enough paper for the day, she went back to the quaking aspen. Its leaves had already started to turn gold, and they trembled in the early autumn wind. Poppy opened the door to the scribe house and walked into the first room. It was warm in the house. She passed through the rooms to find a towel for her hands and saw Ivy sitting alone with an empty sheet of paper in front of her.

Ivy saw Poppy come in and looked up. "Finished already?" she said.

"Already? It's been hours," Poppy said.

"I must have lost track of the time."

"Have you eaten?"

"Not yet. I will in a minute."

"Stay there. I'll get you something."

Poppy dried her hands and went to the kitchen. She cut some slices of bread and made a quick salad from some of the wilting greens she found there.

"You should come back to my house tonight for dinner," she called to the next room. "My grandmother loved hearing you talk about your craft last time you were by." It was a lie, but it wasn't a lie that would hurt anyone. Ivy needed good food and company, Poppy was sure of it, and her family could afford a little boring conversation every once in a while. *Especially if I grow up to be like Ivy*, she thought, feeling her future loneliness stretch out in front of her like a shadow.

She brought the food to Ivy's desk.

Ivy looked down at the sad meal. "I should go restock my kitchen soon, shouldn't I?"

"You're so busy," Poppy said, her eyes avoiding the empty sheet of paper in Ivy's hands. "Let me do it. If you have dinner with us tonight, I can go foraging for you tomorrow."

"I need you to do me a favor," Poppy said. She didn't look up at Clover as she talked, but she could sense her standing there—tall, acorn-brown hair brushing up against her chin, her subtle smile. Poppy kept her eyes on the pages laid out in front of her, two stacks laid out on her mother's kitchen table. She copied words from one stack of papers to another.

"Sure, whatever you need." Clover sat beside her and pushed some wayward red hairs behind Poppy's ear.

"Don't touch me while I'm writing, okay? I don't want to slip while I'm copying the letters."

"Okay, sorry. How can I help?"

"Can you gently remind people to bring food to Ivy?" It felt so awkward to ask. But if the settlement wanted a scribe, they had to remember to feed her; it was how it had always been. "You know, be nice about it. I think people just haven't been thinking about Ivy lately. She's shut herself into her house more than usual. I think she's trying to write her journals."

"Of course," Clover said.

Poppy could hear the embarrassment in Clover's voice and moved quickly to change the subject. "Thank you. Look what I've been working on."

"What is it?"

"It's your story, 'The Wind and the Wayward Traveler.' We sent a copy to the next settlement over. Ivy thinks they could learn it this year for their own festival."

Clover looked down at the indiscernible markings on the paper. "This is it? You've written it all down?" There was something about Clover's smiles that made everyone feel good about themselves. Poppy felt that pride now, watching Clover lean over the pages to see the story.

"This is it," Poppy said. "I'm making a copy for you. I know you can't read it, but I think you should have a copy of your own work, you know?"

"Poppy, this is amazing. Thank you so much!" Her eyes traced the symbols along the page.

"I can't read all of it yet, but I'll learn. These symbols here," Poppy traced two letters along the page with her finger, "together they mean 'wind'. Someday I'll be able to read it all back to you."

"But I know it all," Clover said.

"I know but—" Poppy couldn't think of how to finish the sentence. Why *did* she feel the need to read Clover's story? It felt important. It *was* important, but Poppy couldn't put together why. "I—I know you know it. But if I write it down, then other people can know it, too. We can share it."

"I don't understand," Clover said.

Poppy looked up at Clover. She could tell by Clover's eyes that she wanted to understand, that she wanted to join Poppy in this but that she couldn't.

Poppy was putting away a gift of yellow bread, strawberry jam, and tea brought by Marigold's children, when there was another knock at the door of the scribe's house.

"I can get it this time," Ivy said.

Two men were at the door. One Ivy had never seen before, but one looked familiar in a way she couldn't place. "Welcome, travelers," she said.

"Thank you!" the first man said. "Could you be Ivy?"

Ivy smiled. "Yes, I'm Ivy. Please come in."

"Can always tell a scribe's house by the inky cap mushrooms all around the house," the first man said as the two walked down the steps and into the house.

"You've got a good eye!" Poppy said, running into the room to join them. "We are just sitting to tea. Would you like some?"

"Please," the first man said. "You must be Poppy!"

"I am! And who might you be?"

"Phlox," said the first man. He was short with the beginnings of a belly and gray popping up around the temples, though he looked to be too young for it. His face was smiling and flushed from the cold.

The other man was young and tall. He kept his hair long and had a neatly trimmed beard. "And I'm called Huckleberry," he said.

"Huckleberry!" Poppy said. She and Ivy exchanged glances. "You must be here to visit your family and meet your new niece!"

"Yes. Thank you for the letter."

"And we would *love* some tea!" Phlox said, pulling off his scarf and setting it in the corner, comfortable as if he were visiting his own family.

"I'll get the tea!" Poppy said. "Please, sit. Make yourselves comfortable!"

Ivy led the two men to the dining room table as Poppy heated the water for tea. Huckleberry, the more serious of the two, looked around the room as if not knowing where his eyes should land. Phlox, a constant smile on his face, kept his eyes locked on Ivy. Ivy couldn't stop herself from blushing.

"Have you seen the baby Daisy yet?" Phlox said at last.

"No, actually. I haven't made it over that way."

"Ah, then you must come with us!" Phlox said.

"Oh, no, I couldn't come with you. It's a special moment for Huckleberry and the family. I wouldn't want to intrude."

"Of course you should come," Huckleberry said in little more than a whisper as Poppy poured tea into his cup. "Both of you. If it weren't for you, we wouldn't even know about Daisy."

"Right! We wouldn't have come at all!" Phlox said. "You must join us! Nothing to lift the spirits like seeing a new baby."

"What makes you think we need our spirits lifted?" Ivy said.

Poppy sat down and blew into her tea.

"Oh, meaning no offense of course. It would raise anyone's spirits, wouldn't it? Don't you think so, Huckleberry? And we'd love to have you join us."

Huckleberry lifted his tea and took a sip. "Of course."

Poppy tried to catch Ivy's eye. She knew better than to say she wanted to go without Ivy's approval first.

Ivy took a sip of her tea. "We don't have any gifts to bring," Ivy said.

Phlox said, "Ah! You're bringing Huckleberry! That's the best gift you could bring, don't you think?"

Ivy looked over at Poppy, finally catching the excitement in her eyes. "Okay," Ivy said. "Of course we'll come. Thank you for inviting us."

A breeze blew cold evening air as the bundled-up group approached the wind-bent oak tree where Huckleberry's family lived.

"*You* knock!" Phlox said to Ivy. "We'll stand behind you. It will be a better surprise."

Ivy rolled her eyes, but she stood in front and knocked. Mallow opened the door, looking harried and sleep deprived. "Oh, hello, Ivy. Poppy," she said. Then her face lit up. "Oh! Have you had a letter back from my son?"

"I'm sorry, no," Ivy said. Poppy could barely contain her giggles. "No letter," Ivy continued. "Instead he's come straight to you!"

Ivy and Poppy stepped to the side revealing the handsome son and his smiling companion.

Mallow shrieked and ran forward into Huckleberry's arms. She was so small beside him, enveloped completely in his long arms. Poppy saw the hint of a smile on Huckleberry's shadowed face.

"Hello, Mother," Huckleberry said.

"My boy! My dear boy!" she said. Then, "Oh dear," as cold air blow past. "Come in, all of you! Get inside where it's warm! And meet the baby! Yes, everyone, come meet the little one."

Mallow ushered them all inside.

The living room was full of flickering candles as the sun dipped down outside, and the candle light flickered across the wooden walls of the tree and the furniture carved with fruit and flowers.

"Prim! Iris! We have company. Come see!"

Mallow's husband Prim came first. He looked confused until his eyes fell on Huckleberry. Then he put a hand to his heart. His knees fell out from under him before he caught them again and righted himself. "Huckleberry!" he cried. "My son! You've come home!"

"Huckleberry?" a voice from another room called. Then Iris appeared, her golden hair falling from a hastily tied bun. A small infant squirmed in her arms. "It's you!" she said. "We were so hoping you'd come!"

Huckleberry walked across the room to hug his sister. He smiled down at Daisy, who looked up at him with wide, curious eyes. Then he hugged his father, who combed his fingers through Huckleberry's long, brown hair.

Ivy's face hurt with smiling. She saw Poppy beside her, wiping away tears but smiling just the same.

From the corner of her eye, Ivy sensed that Huckleberry's companion, Phlox, was watching her. Even as the family hugged in reunion, even as Huckleberry lifted his new niece and kissed her forehead, Phlox kept his eyes on Ivy. She was careful not to make eye contact as she put her arm around Poppy and let Poppy rest her head against her shoulder.

"It's just so beautiful, isn't it?" Poppy whispered.

Mallow left the clump of family and crossed the room over to Ivy and Poppy. "Thank you so much for bringing him home!" she said. She wrapped the two of them in a strong hug.

"And you!" she said to Phlox. "What is your name? Did you come with Huckleberry?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm Phlox. I read your letter to Huckleberry and decided to tag along. I hope that's okay."

Ivy whipped her head around to look at Phlox, her mouth open. Phlox laughed, his smiling eyes glittering.

"Thank you so much for coming," Mallow said.

"You're a scribe!" Poppy said. "I've never met another scribe! We're so happy to meet you, aren't we Ivy?"

Ivy nodded, mouth still agape.

"Well, we *are*," Poppy said. "We were just talking about meeting other scribes, weren't we Ivy?"

"Yes, we were," Ivy said, but it was like someone else was saying it. She felt stiff as stone. "Why didn't you tell me you were the scribe?"

Phlox stepped in closer to the scribe and her apprentice. "Isn't it clear by now how much I love surprises?" he said. "I must admit, I've been anxious to meet you. I've been reading the postscripts on the letters you send, you see."

Ivy blushed. "But you've never written anything back."

"I know," Phlox said. "I'm a terrible scribe! All day I write up letters for everyone else, and I have no skill at choosing the right words for myself. I spent

months scribbling out responses and then tearing up the pages. When Mallow called her son back home, I invited myself along to meet you in person."

"To meet *me*?" Ivy said.

Poppy kissed Ivy's cheek. "I'll leave you here to chat while I go meet the baby," she said.

"To meet *you*," Poppy heard Phlox say as she stepped away to join the family crowded around Huckleberry and the baby in his arms. She couldn't stop the warm laughter that pushed its way finally free. Tears and laughter both—a release. There seemed to be so much that she had been holding in.

"She's so beautiful," Poppy said, looking down at Daisy's round face, her little hands stretching and reaching out. She offered the baby her finger, and Daisy wrapped her tiny hand around it. "It's nice to meet you, little one," she said.

Mallow stood beside Poppy and put her arm around her shoulders. "Thank you so much for bringing my son home," she said. "Thank you so much."

"I didn't bring him home, though," Poppy said. "I just helped send the letter."

"But he wouldn't have come home without you and Ivy," Prim said. "He wouldn't even have known he had a new niece."

"It's true," Huckleberry said. "You helped bring me home."

"Well," she said. Her cheeks flushed red beneath her freckles. "I'm happy to have helped. I'm glad you came home. Thank you."

"You're thanking us?" Huckleberry said. He set the baby Daisy in Poppy's arms.

Poppy held the baby close to her chest. She breathed in the warm milky smell of the baby's head. "Yes," she said. "Thank you."

The next morning, as had been discussed the previous night, Poppy returned to Mallow's house and brought Clover. Clover had insisted on bringing her girlfriend Dandy, so she came, too, looking awkward and uncomfortable under her mane of bright yellow hair. They brought three loaves of bread and a big pot of soup.

Ivy and Phlox were already there, with great bags under their eyes and huge smiles on their faces.

Poppy sat next to Ivy and whispered, "Long night last night?" with a smirk.

"I don't think we got a wink of sleep!" Ivy loud-whispered back. "Phlox brought a pack-full of books, and we read and talked all through the night!"

Poppy laughed and gave Ivy a tight hug. "This is the happiest I've ever seen you," she said. "I'm so pleased."

Prim set out tea and enough cups for everyone.

Mallow stood in front of the room. "Thank you all for coming! Today we are celebrating my lovely daughter, Iris, and her beautiful baby, Daisy. We are also celebrating the return of our son, Huckleberry, who has resettled in the neighboring farm. His companion, Phlox, is the scribe for their settlement,

and he has brought us stories from our neighboring storytellers. We have asked Ivy if she would read one to us, and she has graciously accepted!"

Ivy walked to the front of the room with a pile of papers in her hands. Her hands shook as she looked over the crowd of people in front of her. But these were her neighbors and friends, she realized.

"This story," she said, "is called 'The Sun and Moon Say Farewell.'"

"I think I understand now," Clover said to Poppy as they stood outside the oak tree. She was still wiping tears away, but she was smiling, too. "Can you help me learn that story? Maybe I can recite it sometime. Or maybe Ivy can. She read it so beautifully."

"Of course I will," Poppy said. "I could read that story a hundred times."

Poppy turned back toward Ivy to wave as they started to walk away, but Ivy didn't see her. She was talking with Phlox, beaming, her cheeks flushed.

"I'll miss you," Phlox said. He and Ivy were back in the scribe's house beneath the aspen, eating yellow bread and strawberry jam while sprawled across the bed, their stocking feet touching over the blankets.

"But you'll come back soon?"

"At the first possible moment."

"And you'll write?"

"Every day."

Ivy stroked his hair with her fingertips. She put her hand over his. "I'll miss you, too. Thank you for coming all this way. I've been waiting so long to meet you."

It was snowing outside as Poppy straightened the piles of letters in the underground house. The storm was too great and too cold for Poppy to walk home. She knew she'd have to stay at the scribe house at least until morning. There was already a bed laid out for her and an extra set of nightclothes.

Ivy and Poppy ate their evening meal in pajamas. The snow had already covered the window, and the candlelight danced along the walls as they ate. They talked about Phlox, who had gone home a month before, and Huckleberry, who would be going home come spring. They talked about Clover's new festival story and Marigold's kids and the baby Daisy.

Ivy looked different these days, Poppy noted. Tired, but there was a happy glow about her. Other folk came by the house most days, and her pantry was stocked to bursting, enough to make it through the winter and beyond. She served tea as she told her visitors stories from folk around the world, stories from the past, stories from the scribe journals.

They hugged goodnight, and Ivy went to the back bedroom. Poppy was tired, but there was one more thing she wanted to check—something she'd waited a long time to read.

Ivy didn't write much at the bottom of her letters anymore, but for a time she had. Poppy had transcribed the message to another sheet of paper so she could read it herself once she was able. Her reading was getting much faster now. She only stumbled a little as she read the message.

Poppy blew out the candles and climbed into her made-up bed. As she closed her eyes, she heard the scratching sound of pen against paper as Ivy sat to write her journals. Poppy would only read the journals after Ivy left. It would be like Ivy was still there with her.

She was sad to think that one day Ivy would leave. She knew Ivy wanted to meet the other scribes and see the world for herself. She understood. But she would be sad to see her go. Somewhere along the line, Ivy had become a close friend.

> To the scribe who reads this,
>
> I imagine you are lonely. If you are like me you are lonely. If you are like me you probably can't relate to anyone else in your settlement. But I imagine you could relate to me, and I to you. I think about you, and I wonder about you. I wonder if we would be friends.
>
> Your friend,
> Ivy

ALICIA ADAMS

Alicia Adams lives in the woods in California with her spouse, young daughter, and cat. She is currently absorbed in writing stories about tiny people with expansive inner worlds. You can find her through her website at aliciaadamswriting.com or chat with her on Mastodon at @alicia@wandering.shop.

Q&A with Alicia Adams

The following questions were posed by Erin Keating, author of *The Washing Witch*, and are answered by Alicia Adams about their story *To the Scribe Who Reads This.*

Something that I find so moving about the folk series is that, despite the almost utopic world the characters live in, many of the characters are working through feelings of longing for the broader world, like Ivy in this story. How do you strike that balance of creating a community your readers want to live in, but your character wants to leave?

> Thank you! You know, I don't know if this was an intentional choice.
>
> In the beginning I wanted to set up a story about this community as a whole, but because I didn't know all the characters from the start, I've been putting the community together piece by piece, character by character. I started

writing about characters at the fringes of it, and slowly I've been working my way to the center.

A lot of things happened in my life in quick succession: My partner and I had a child, I started working remotely, the pandemic hit, and we moved to the forest where we didn't know anybody and the culture is so different. While I had always been a person who valued friendships and community, I slowly became hermitish and isolated. I know there's a community around this mountain road or that one, but it still feels mostly elusive.

My characters grapple with feelings of wanting to connect and wanting to seek adventure because as much as I want the best for them, their hearts are still my heart, and their longings are my longings.

I was so excited to see Dandy and Clover from "Dandelion" (*Hearth Stories* Issue 1) make an appearance in this story. How much do you think about what happens to your characters after their story ends? Does that influence the next story you write in this world?

I think about these characters all the time. Because I'm working toward a more communal story, I want my characters to come back again and again, connected through family and friendships. I want to see them from different perspectives, and I want to resolve some of the things left unresolved in their original stories. I

have a few big stories in mind that feature past characters.

In the interview that accompanied "Dandelion" you spoke about some of the world-building questions you ask yourself, including whether the folk could read and write. I thought this story was such an interesting answer to that question: literacy is limited and often isolating for the few who can read and write. Can you speak about your thought process and the decisions you considered when building that system?

I forgot I talked about that in my interview! Yes! In "You're Always Welcome Here" in *Hearth Stories* Issue 2, Sugar Maple gives Lavender her recipe for dandelion wine. Originally I'd wanted her to leave the written recipe for her when she left, but I hadn't worked out if the folk could read and write. This is when I started thinking about literacy for this world. Ultimately I had Sugar Maple tell Lavender the process, and Lavender had to remember all two years of steps. (Which I like in that it's something Lavender has to hold on to, even when Sugar Maple is gone.)

But when I came up with the idea that only some folk could read and write, my immediate thought was how isolating that could be. Like you get this magic power, almost like divination, but no one understands it except you and maybe you're a little weird to everyone else.

As someone who writes both cozy fantasy and darker pieces, how does your process or sources of inspiration differ between those two genres? What stays the same?

> I wrote a lot of dark fiction in my MFA program. I think I had this idea that darker fiction is more important or more impactful, maybe more literary.
>
> Lately a lot of my stories have started out really dark, but then my husband hates the ending. So I get this cool challenge of preserving the best things about the story while making the ending more palatable. Sometimes those stories end up being kind of cozy, which is wild when you look through the drafts.
>
> Writing cozy fiction was a big challenge for me. And it still is! I keep trying to write these community stories and end up writing stories about isolated characters and characters having trouble connecting! But the trying is interesting, and when it works out, I feel great about it. It feels more fulfilling in some ways, more nourishing.
>
> If you look back through my stories, most of them have similar themes. They're just executed differently.

The relationship between Ivy and Phlox is so charming! In Ivy's postscript notes to an as-yet-unknown fellow scribe, I saw parallels with the relationship between author and reader. If given the

opportunity to directly address your readers, say, through this interview question, is there something you'd like to tell them?

> Oh gosh, if I knew how to talk to people directly, why would I write it in fiction! As a person, I have been characterized as overly emotional and an over-sharer. I feel like those traits are well suited to fiction even if they're sometimes frowned upon in real life.
>
> As a writer sometimes it feels like you're standing at a cliff edge throwing messages in bottles into the sea. You don't know if anyone's reading your work, if they're connecting with it or not, if they think you're full of beans (apparently this is a US idiom. Merriam Webster defines it as "not correct or truthful: full of nonsense"). But you keep throwing the bottles in anyway, like Ivy keeps writing her postscripts.
>
> So I'll be brave like Poppy and write my postscript to you without fear of being over emotional or over-sharing:
>
> > Dear Reader,
> >
> > I like you. I don't know who you are or how you got here, but I like you. I'm happy we were able to connect, however briefly, in this story. Even if you didn't like it. Even if you think I'm the worst writer ever. What a gift you've given me by

reading this, knowing that I was thinking of you all along.

I wonder about you. Who is this person who has made it all the way through this interview, through the fourth installment of these interrelated stories, in a small literary magazine that has, in itself, been a work of time and love and passion? Maybe you don't exist, and I'm just throwing another bottle into the sea. But I have to hope that you're there. And what a wonderful thing, taking the time to give this story a chance, finding this little way to connect.

Your friend,
Alicia

Fully Formed

By T.R. Steele

No one in the village of Willowsby would let Rowan bury his golden apple beetle pupae in their garden.

Five years of work, of endless conversations and education at the tavern, the market, and on the street, only to be rejected at every turn. He knew his insects were not popular, and his presence was tolerated more than welcome, but this was a new low.

"I thought old Flora would have been more receptive," said Sabine, one of the few who had believed in his restorative work from the beginning, back when he first trudged into town with enough notebooks and terrariums and specially-gathered soil to weight down a draft horse. She was glaring at the elderly woman's door as Rowan gathered his things from the stoop, which amounted to a wooden chest full of dirt and a dried-up apple in a jar that he toted

around to show people the golden apple beetle's main source of food: the golden apple.

"It's fine," he said. He brushed strands of mousy, sweat-limp hair from his eyes. "She's probably worried for her garden, what kind of animals the pupae might attract. And—"

"Do *not* make excuses for her," said Sabine. She hefted the heavy chest, helping Rowan balance it on his shoulder. "Or anyone else. Kindness has gone to the dogs in this place." She glowered at the door one last time before they marched down the path and back to the dirt road.

They were hardly in the village any longer. What lay before them in the coming twilight was the countryside, where farmer's fields and rolling hills replaced the close-knit plaster and stone buildings.

"All that's left is the Moore's orchard," said Rowan. He held back a sigh and used his free hand to shake the front of his yellow linen shirt, the fanning effect a welcome respite from the summer heat that lingered even this late in the day. Beside him, Sabine had tied her flaxen hair up long ago, and had rolled up the legs of her pants to try and catch the non-existent breeze. A visit to Moore's, before, might have meant cool cups of cider or elderberry cordial, but those days were gone. Now, the thought of showing his face left him with a chill even the summer sun couldn't warm.

"Leona will understand," said Sabine, and she sounded like she believed it, too. "You don't have a choice. And besides—"

"Now who's making excuses, Sab?" countered Rowan, throwing her a smile.

Sabine lightly punched his arm. "Well then, it's decided," she said. "No more fretting. Let's go bury the future."

Golden apple beetles were large, fast-growing beetles that glittered like amber under the sun. They were also dying in droves and not reproducing fast enough to make up for it.

The main source of their food was the sap of the endangered golden apple tree. When they couldn't get that, any rotting apples would do, but only the golden apple's sap would see them growing to their full size and sheen: the length of a palm, as shiny as a cut gem. But the golden apple tree was a tree Rowan and Sabine and most everyone, actually, had heard of since childhood and never seen. It was a short, stout apple tree, much like a crabapple, but the apples it grew were palm-sized and a perfectly rich yellow, like butter, like the moon in autumn, like gold. Apparently, one god or another had been eating an apple and spat the seeds carelessly out of the sky and this was how the tree came to be, but there were many stories. In all of them, however, eating these apples brought blessings, but like any blessed thing, they were notoriously hard to keep around for long. All these stories were important, sure, in the history of the trees, but the only one that mattered to Rowan, however, was the story the beetles told him.

"Movement ahead," said Sabine, her mouth splitting open into a yawn as she pointed. She was not bored, he knew, but exhausted; they had been toting these beetles around town since just after dawn, waiting in the early summer heat, and it was inching ever closer to nighttime. They were on Moore property now, following the fence: on one side, the apple orchards stretched out, infinite. And on the other, the dirt road hummed with dust and grasshoppers and plants swaying despite the lack of a breeze.

But their sunburned necks and waiting fatigue would be well-worth it if Leona Moore would agree to let him bury the pupae in her dirt, let them grow in a safe place, a fenced orchard with guard dogs and a whole family of folks who knew the importance of relationships with insects. The number of rotting apples wouldn't hurt, either.

Rowan looked ahead, heart pounding, and saw the figure on horseback drawing closer. He stopped, and Sabine stopped, too, looking between him and the rider. She had the better eyes, and the closed expression on her face told him all he needed to know: it was Leona.

He braced himself as the horse trotted to a stop in front of them, kicking up swirls of dust. He squinted as it settled, shielding his eyes. He could not bring himself to look at her just yet.

"Sabine!" said Leona, by way of greeting, and then her voice changed. It was thin as she went on. He tried not to cringe away from it. "And Rowan—welcome," she said. "It's been a long time."

"It has," said Sabine. She moved forward, clasping Leona's hand, pulling her into an embrace, and then, Rowan looked.

She was sunburnt and had her hair tied back in a kerchief. Like he and Sabine, she wore the day on her like a second skin: sweat, dust, and practiced smiles. On her face were the lines carved by grief he'd seen at their start, deepened, now it had been almost two years since her father died and she'd taken over the orchard. But as before, she was beautiful, and he had not forgotten what those lips felt like on his.

"What brings you two here?" she said. Her grey-green eyes flickered from the wooden chest on Rowan's shoulder to the day-worn look of their clothes. "It can't be cider. I just sent a cartload of barrels into town yesterday. Unless the well's already run dry—"

"It's my beetles," said Rowan, and Leona blinked.

She knew about the beetles; when they were together, she had been privy to his travels, looking high and low in the surrounding counties for any remaining golden apple trees, stunted and old as they might be, any fruit farmers who had sighted an unusual beetle in their fields, anything at all. It was how they had met, after all, five years ago when he settled in Willowsby to continue his work. The town was known for its apples and had, some years ago, been one of the last known habitats for the beetles. A handful of Leona's trees had found their partners in the wild golden apples, whether their pollen was brought to them by bees or air, and there those

crosses still lived. And now that he was ready to try and bring some beetles back into the world, here they were, worlds apart, and yet—he could reach out and touch her hand, if he wanted, right now.

"Your beetles," she said. It was not a question. Then, understanding dawned on her ruddy face. "Your beetles!" she repeated. "Are they—you mean—"

Sabine nodded. "They're going to emerge," she said, "in a week or less. And we need a place for them to be buried. So—"

"Will you help me?" said Rowan, his tongue leaping in front of him. "Care for them, until they emerge? They'll need fruit, but I can pay, and someone to keep an eye on the soil bed, but ..."

"Of course," she said. "You can—you can come stay at the orchard."

Stay? Rowan stared at her.

She returned his stare, her face flushing. "It'll be easier that way," she said quickly. "I can't spare anyone to watch the beetles. We're preparing for the fall. But the golden crosses are growing their new branches in quite nicely. Though I don't think we'll see fruit for another decade. And by then—"

She paused. By then what? he wanted to ask, desperate for her to continue. But Sabine let out a relieved sigh.

"Gods' reach, thank you," she said. She grabbed Leona's hands and held them in her own, squeezing. "I can't wait to be rid of these beetles."

Rowan shot her a look, but Leona laughed. There was no anger in Sabine's words, only relief, and he

could not fault her for that. She was his most steadfast friend in all these efforts, even though he did slip her some coin for her help.

"I'm sure they can't wait to be rid of themselves," said Leona, looking over Sabine's head at Rowan. "Change is hard."

"Yes," he agreed. "Yes, it is."

The days passed quickly.

Rowan was given the stifling loft in an old byre-turned-shed near the patch of earth where they'd buried the beetles, then covered them in with netting attached to wooden stakes to prevent any digging creatures from nosing about too easily. That way, he could check on them daily, looking for signs of emergence.

Sabine, however, only stayed for one night to recover from the arduous day before. Then, she said, she was needed back at the inn. It couldn't wait. There was good money to be made as a musician in the summer, when drink was drunk in plenty and pockets were full, and Sabine's singing voice was second to none in Willowsby and half the villages around it.

"That leaves you alone with your beetles again," said Leona.

She had brought him his second meal of the day as he sat vigil by the net-covered earth. Above him, a few apple trees provided some shade. It was quiet out here, among the grass and the birds, the sound of the

sapling planting and tree felling and the goats and the cider brewery far to the east of this section of the orchard. But it was also lonely. The hand who had brought him his breakfast hadn't stayed for long; just long enough to ask Rowan what he was doing. And when he said waiting for beetles to come into themselves, he had left, tight-lipped, curiosity dissipated.

"Sabine will be back, I'm sure, just in time to see them," he said. "She's got some old magic in her. She knows when things are about to happen."

"I wish I had some of that," said Leona. She crouched down beside Rowan, so close he could smell the sweat and scent of grass rolling off her. "It might've helped, you know. Knowing before he died."

"Leo—"

"I know there wasn't anything I could've done," she said. She stuck a finger through the netting, into the soil, stirred it around a little. "I just think about it sometimes. That's all. Sorry—you've heard this all before."

He had, a long time ago—in the ensuing weeks after her father had collapsed two autumns ago in the orchard, never to get up again, Leona had convinced herself if only she had been there, picking with him, maybe, just maybe—and around and around she had gone, in a tireless cycle, until Rowan had told her no. There was nothing she nor anyone could do. That was life. Move on.

"All's well," he said. "You can say it. As many times as you need to. As long as you're not—"

She looked at him, grey-green boring into hazel. "I don't blame myself anymore," she said. "You were right. I just wish you hadn't been."

"I'm—it was wrong of me," he said. "Speaking so harshly."

"Yes," said Leona. "And I don't forgive you for that."

He winced. He should have known. It had been two years of polite hellos and little waves after they'd parted; not only because of that exchange, no, but because the weight of each other had borne down on them both. And now—

"I've missed you," said Leona. "And I'm glad you came here. Even if it was just for the beetles."

Her eyes glittered. Rowan smiled.

"Yes," he said, returning her smile. "Just for the beetles."

Three days later, Rowan sat on an overturned wooden crate on the edge of the woods, waiting for the golden apple beetles to emerge from the earth.

He would see, now, who had survived and who had not. He had calculated this carefully, with a keen understanding of their thirty-two-day lifecycle, of the time they needed to spend in good, warm soil, of how soon the adult beetles needed to feed. Thanks to Leona, they would have a better chance at survival, having been buried in the earth in an orchard rather than emerge in a wooden box in a shed somewhere, only to be stuffed in another box and brought

somewhere to be tumbled out and set free. On his shaking knee Rowan held a sheaf of paper, and above that hovered a piece of charcoal, waiting to scratch off his first tally mark. But there was a problem, and it wasn't his jangling nerves.

Leona had not yet arrived. She was supposed to be bringing a bucket of rotting apples for the newly-emerged beetles to feast on once they had found their feet. He tried to still his leg, but failed.

Sabine, leaning against a nearby trunk, lifted her gaze from studying her sheet music long enough to roll her eyes at him. "Rest easy," she said. "She'll be here. There's always something happening at the Moore's orchard."

"I know," he muttered, and turned his gaze back to the dirt. There was no movement from the patch of earth. He and Leona had cleared it of growth and debris from the last few days that morning, making it easier for the beetles to emerge.

He and Leona had spent a lot of time together, in truth, over the last three days. She had visited often, at first under the pretense of bringing him meals; and then, simply to see him, ask if the beetles had poked their heads out yet; and finally, for no reason other than to sit with him awhile, letting the day slough off her, as they used to do together as the moon rose.

They spoke as little as they used to, sometimes, simply sitting and breathing together. And then the night would unfurl, and Leona would look at him and ask him again why it was he loved to wait so much for something that wasn't even so certain; and he would respond, as he always did, that it was

because he loved whatever it was he was waiting for. The cooling summer rain, a warm bed at the end of a long day, the finding of another golden apple tree, the beetles emerging. None of it was ever certain, and yet—he was there, waiting.

But that did not mean he was not impatient. Where was she? He looked behind him, back at the path that led away from the orchard. That look was not the first one. He wondered again what had kept her. He tried not to think of her as her father had been, in the grass, alone, breathing his last. It was an image that had haunted him for weeks after his death and their parting. What if he—what if she—he squeezed his eyes shut. It was useless to worry, and selfish, too; he had not gone through that pain. He took a deep breath, the summer air thick on his tongue, and then heard Sabine gasp.

"Look!" she said. He looked. She was scrambling over on her knees, pointing at the exposed dirt.

Rowan looked, heart pounding, as he saw what she was seeing: the soil was alive. And more soil began to churn around it. The beetles were emerging.

"Sabine, grab your gloves," he said, chest burning. "They're here."

The last beetle began to emerge just as Leona ran up to Rowan and Sabine, stinking of vinegar and apples.

"Gods' fruits, I'm *so* sorry," she said. A tin bucket in her hand sloshed dangerously. Unthinking, Rowan

leapt up from his crouch by the beetles' earthen bed and attempted to take it from her, but she sluiced it around in self-made exasperation. "You wouldn't believe—all day, we've been dealing with the goats. They got out again and made a mess of the sapling field. The herders were useless, and you think they'd be more prepared for—"

"You're feeding the grass more than the beetles, Leo," said Sabine. She was right; the rotten fruit and all its juices was spilling over the lip of the bucket and rolling down the sides in great, brown, soupy rivulets. Leona yelped and set the bucket down.

"I'm so sorry—" she began again, but Rowan shook his head.

"It's alright, I'm just glad you're here," he said. He saw Sabine roll her eyes again, smiling, and he frowned at her. "Sabine," he said, "would you please take this and pour it around the roots of the trees? The beetles will find it eventually, and they'll be grateful."

"Right, I'm sure they will, but you all sure won't be when I come back smelling like the bottom of a cider barrel," she said, cutting him off, but she picked up the bucket anyway and hurried off to the trees.

He turned back to Leona, who stood stiffly, but looked like she was on the verge of tears. "Really, I am so—"

"All's well," he said. "Look, help me get this last one out."

They both ducked down to the patch of exposed soil, where the beetle was emerging, nose first.

They watched as the final beetle, shiny, the colour of honey, and something akin to wet, bumbled across the expanse of dirt, unsteady on its legs. It was beautiful, and Rowan felt his throat constrict. There were the six jointed legs, a set of long mandibles, tiny, obsidian eyes. It was fully-formed, alive, ready to slowly work towards its being in the world.

"They're so clumsy," said Leona.

"You might be, too, if you grew to be five times your own size overnight," he said.

The others had become accustomed to their new bodies fairly quickly and began lumbering into the grass, drawn to the scent of trees and their sap all around them. Soon after, they had spread their four wings and flew into the day. But this one was a little slower, it seemed. Rowan frowned.

"We might have to help it," he said.

Leona looked at him, nodded. "Anything," she said. "I'll help it with anything. I want them to all have a chance."

They followed the beetle through the grass, into the orchard, watching its slow progress as it searched for its first meal.

Rowan's knees were stained with green. Leona's nails had dirt under them. They crawled like strange insects themselves, at times, keeping a close eye on the thumb-sized insect as it went. Sabine had said no thank you, I'll sit here stinking of fermented fruit

with my sheet music, and then take my thanks of a supper with a cool bath afterward.

Leona had laughed, and promised Sabine a barrel of cider, too. Rowan forgot that she had not only parted from him, but Sabine, too; and the two were also back together, in their own way. It was good to see Sabine smile the smile she only had for Leona; crooked, and a little coy.

"It's found a tree," said Leona, drawing Rowan out of his thoughts.

They were walking, now, following the butter-yellow beetle from a distance. It had found a tree, and was clambering up the dark roots, toward the lichen-covered trunk. They hurried over just as it tumbled, fell, and was on its back.

Rowan leapt forward to right it, but Leona held him back.

"Let's see," she said. "He needs to build up his strength."

"Yes," said Rowan, "but he doesn't have to do it all alone."

Still, they waited a moment, crouching, watching as the beetle rocked, trying to flip itself back over. Almost, almost—and then Rowan couldn't wait any longer. He reached forward, and his hand brushed Leona's as they both reached out to nudge the beetle further up the trunk. He paused, glancing at her, but she only held his gaze and nodded before leaning into the motion. Her fingertips touched the carapace alongside his, helping the beetle get back on its legs.

"There," she said. "He can manage the rest on his own."

Somewhere, a cicada hummed, splitting up the silence between them. The wind played with the ends of Leona's hair, and Rowan wished, suddenly, harshly, that he had stayed even as she pushed him away, crawled into the cocoon of her grief, but—no. That was not what she had wanted. And now here he was, squatting by a stout apple tree with with her, both of them hoping and wishing for the same: that the beetles would survive, find each other, make their way into the world and stay in it.

"We should head back," said Leona. She moved so fluidly that he almost didn't catch himself; she stood, reached out to take his hand, and he leaned in and reached up, ready to be taken. But then he paused.

"Leo—"

"Rowan," she said. She held out her hand. "Come on. Let me help you up. And then let me lean on you as we walk back. My feet are killing me. I wish I had four more like your gods'-blessed beetles."

He laughed, loud, shining, and reached up to take her hand.

T.R. STEELE

T.R. Steele is a trans man and author of fantasy and gothic fiction living and writing in Toronto. He shares his home with a cat, a blue-tongued skink, several houseplants, and an expansive library of plant and animal reference books. You can find him on Bluesky.

Q&A with T.R. Steele

The following questions were posed by Kendra Recht, author of *I Am Half-Sick of Shadows*, and are answered by T.R. Steele about their story *Fully-formed.*

There is so much subtle world-building in this piece—for example, the apple tree's origin myth and the casual mentions of Sabine's "old magic." It seems like we're just dipping our toes into a really vibrant, rich world. Is there any background lore you wanted to fit in but couldn't?

> Always! But I often "discover" the world as I am writing. I'm not a detailed world-builder, but I pay particular attention to the ecosystems of my stories. If I imagine a real or invented plant, animal, or insect, I immediately start thinking about the environment they're in, how people may have influenced, disrupted, harmed or helped that environment, what other plants and animals might be present, what the

geography is like, etc. ... And then, from there, I can think about what stories or beliefs are attached to the beings in this world and layer in even more elements.

That's how I got from the beetle to the apple tree to the apple tree's origin myth (which of course involves gods and their ilk) to the mentions of old magic, and on and on it goes!

I can often spend a lot longer in each of the worlds of my short stories, but I give myself a word-count cut-off to prevent that from happening too often.

There are many different insects or other animals you could have chosen to base the story around. How did you end up deciding upon a beetle?

I love beetles because, like many other species of insects, they are one of the oldest life forms on Earth. There's so much history to them that amazes me. I'm also drawn to any non-human being that takes a long time to grow. Beetles can take weeks, months, or even years to go from their pupal stage to adulthood. There's resilience, patience, and a strength in that. It's also a very rich vein of thought for stories and world-building.

Also, though I am not an entomologist or any kind of insect expert myself, I know these people are some of the most passionate folks out there. I wanted to highlight the love people have for insects in general through Rowan and

his dedication to helping this endangered species of fictional beetle.

When writing a short story, what element usually comes to you first (theme, plot, characters, etc)? What was the inspiration for "Fully-formed" and how did you build the story out from there?

I almost always start with an image—either of a setting, a particular scene, or even something as small as a single object, plant, or animal. I'm a very visual person and I find this is the best place for me to start!

When I sat down to write the story that would become "Fully-formed," I had a clear image of a golden insect in my head. I almost went with a cicada, another creature I love dearly, but decided to go with beetles as I'd been researching beetles native to my area around the same time.

I loved the first line of this story. It drew me in immediately and set the scene perfectly. So now I'm curious: if you had to choose a favorite line or part of the story, what would it be?

Thank you! I'd honestly have to pick the last line. I always strive to have a satisfying closing line that holds the core of the story out to the reader, and I'm proud of that particular line.

I Am Half-Sick of Shadows

By Kendra Recht

Every night, Agatha waits for the dead to rise.

Spirits poke their soft translucent heads above the water's surface, emerging from the depths like smoke. She never tires of watching them. They mill about, wobbling like newborn fawns, still unsteady in their new ethereal forms. They wave their little fingerless appendages at each other, floating aimlessly along the water's surface until, as always, a shimmering portal blooms on the far side of the lake, and a slim spectral hand welcomes them home.

Agatha has never seen the owner of this hand, if there is one at all. Its delicate fingers shine like stars; her own are worn and calloused from weaving nets to dredge up the dead.

In the moonlight, Mouse's skeletal form is wrapped in shadow. He twitches a ghostly ear. His bony tail scrapes against the floorboards as it twitches back and forth.

"Slow night," the cat remarks.

"Very," says Agatha. She sees only a handful of shapes stretching from the water, swaying in the moonlight. Their yellow eyes are perfect cartoonish circles. She doesn't know if they have mouths. She's never seen one up close, and if they make noise, she's never heard it.

She threads her needle as Mouse turns away, pouncing on a stinkbug.

When the moon is highest, a vortex as large as her cabin door swirls open on the opposite shore. The hand's elegant fingers curl and the shades float slowly towards it. Agatha sews diligently as she watches. She works until dawn, then tacks the new section of the tapestry on the living room wall. She's rendered four figures in a miniature tableau: a man fishing on a flimsy raft as storm clouds gather. A flaxen-haired boy climbing a tree, reaching for an apple. Two soldiers in opposing colors brandishing weapons.

The shades cross over peacefully. Their bones rest comfortably in the earth. And Agatha the Endkeeper extracts their final moments to decorate her wall.

Agatha doesn't remember anyone's death, but her fingers do. She doesn't know why, but then again there are many things she doesn't know, like how long she's been here, or what she did before this. She does not recall childhood. It's like she appeared in this cabin fully grown, already sure of her purpose and all the tasks she must complete.

To Agatha's knowledge nobody has ever died in this lake. The dead come from everywhere else, pushing through the dark, muddy bottom just to be caught in her net. Then Agatha the Endkeeper frees them from their mortal shell, shepherding them to that divinely welcoming hand. There are unspoken rules: Agatha will not talk to the shades, and the shades will not talk to her. No one will enter her cabin, and Agatha will not leave the lake. These are rules Agatha *knows*. She isn't sure how she knows them, because she's never met anybody but Mouse, who she raised by hand many years ago, stringing his bones together with the threads she spins from lake grasses and spiderwebs and her own iron-strong hair.

They've had the same nightly routine for many years. Shut the door. Sew. Watch the spirits. Sew. Admire the hand. Sew, sew, sew.

Thirteen shades emerge from the water as Agatha threads her needle. She hears a thump, which she ignores. But as the portal opens across the lake, there is a second, then a third. Hesitantly, Agatha cracks open the door. Outside is a swaying shadow with bright eyes and no mouth. She points a long finger in the direction of the portal. The shade stays put.

"Shoo," Agatha says, breaking the silence in her panic. "*Shoo.* The afterlife is that way."

It doesn't leave. And when the hand retreats and the doorway to elsewhere closes, the shade is still on her doorstep, staring at her with expressionless eyes.

"Well this is new," Mouse says, breaking the standstill. "Better let it inside."

It floats in behind them, and Agatha, still hesitant, puts the kettle on for tea. She sets a cup on the living room table and the shade drifts with her. She gestures to an armchair before realizing it probably can't sit, but it does, its body sinking partially through the cushions. It can't drink the tea, but it tries anyway. The teacup slips through its clumsy grasp and shatters on the floor, spilling hot liquid everywhere and frightening Mouse under the sofa.

The shade shivers. Afraid, maybe, or embarrassed.

"It's all right," Agatha says and finds a towel to wipe up the mess. The shade stoops with her, its incorporeal little limbs fruitlessly trying to scoop up broken porcelain. It ripples uncertainly, then slinks into a corner where it watches her from afar. Agatha returns to her craft, her eyes occasionally flicking towards her first ever guest.

She worries about the shade. When the sun rises, will it disappear? What about its afterlife? What happens now to this wayward thing who can't say a word?

But when dawn comes, the shade still lurks in the same corner, barely visible in the morning sunlight. "You can leave tonight," she says.

When she hangs up her needlework from the evening, there are twelve people and a little blob of black with yellow pinprick eyes.

The shade refuses to leave. Agatha tries to nudge it towards the water's edge but her hands go right through it.

"What if it's my fault?" She asks Mouse. "I talked to it. I'm not supposed to do that."

"I don't think anyone ever said that," Mouse says. The shade hovers behind him, nodding enthusiastically in agreement.

It follows Agatha as she does her daily chores. It tries to hold the end of the net as she mends a hole and when that doesn't work it watches intently, like it's trying to help through sheer will alone. It sits in her boat, copying the rowing motions, then the way Agatha deftly moves the net in the water. When she lays out the day's haul of bones, it wiggles its wispy body vigorously enough to produce gusts of air to dry them. It pets Mouse, who sinks inside its lap and rattles his bones in an approximation of a purr.

Each night Agatha tries to convince it to join the other shades.

"The afterlife is where you belong," she pleads. "Not here. It's time for you to rest."

The shade flutters and floats back inside, sitting right beside the newest segment of Agatha's tapestry, which now always includes a little black blob in the

corner. It's the first repeated face—if one could call it that—she's ever embroidered.

Occasionally she'll catch it staring at different parts of the tapestry, as if committing it all to memory. It eyes her, contorting its body into a question mark shape.

"No one wants to remember their last moments," Agatha replies. She runs her fingers over an image of a red-faced woman grasping at her throat, a half-finished steak on the table before her. "She doesn't want to remember choking. She wants to remember that meal. That's what she'll take with her."

The shade untwists. It tilts its head slightly and shuts its eyes, miming a pillow with its little hands at one side of its head.

"I sleep well enough."

It repeats the question. Agatha sighs. "A bit," she admits.

It's tiring work. Her fingers ache after years of nightly needlepoint. She sleeps in brief, sporadic naps. Her walls are running out of space. And what is she supposed to do with this stubborn spirit who refuses to move on?

"Just let it stay," Mouse says, who is charmed by the shade's attempts to snuggle with him. "It'll go when it wants to."

She doesn't really want the shade to leave. It's nice, having company. It's fun to teach it how to sew even though it drops its needle every few seconds as its solidity falters. She likes having a shadow, even though it's her responsibility to shepherd it home. It occurs to Agatha that she is used to thinking about

other people and how they live and how they die. She's always felt like Agatha the Endkeeper, not Agatha who just *happens* to be the Endkeeper. Maybe that doesn't have to be all she is. Maybe it's okay for her duties and desires to diverge, just a little bit. She says that to Mouse and the shade one night and Mouse stands very still before shaking all his bones like he's been caught in a downpour. The shade spins around in a circle, which Agatha thinks means it's pleased with her conclusion.

That night, Agatha embroiders alone, the shade nowhere to be seen. For a horrible few hours she fears it's left, but just before daybreak she finds it in the den using its stumpy arm to paint a childish, heavy-handed rendering of the same scenes she's just sewn. With a prickle of pride, she frames it and displays it in a place of honor on the mantle. In the corner of the painting is a little black blob.

Not for the first time, Agatha wonders why the shade's final moments are rendered as a spirit, not as a human. The shade is already dead, with last moments that should have already been recorded. Then again, this is the first shade she's ever encountered who has remained in the world for longer than a night. This would hardly be the first rule it's broken.

Agatha gives up on trying to send it on its way. They sit in cozy firelight and watch the spirits together until one night after a particularly exhausting day, the shade stays on the porch. It glides down to the edge of the water, hovering by the boat. It doesn't want to go alone.

"You don't have to be afraid," says Agatha. "But I'll take you, if you want."

She readies the oars and Mouse weaves around her ankles, then the part of the shade where its ankles would be if it had legs.

Mouse sighs forlornly. "I suppose this is goodbye."

Agatha scratches behind his ephemeral ears and ushers the shade inside the boat.

The vortex begins to open as they set out. It's the first time Agatha's ever been out so late in the presence of so many shades. She should be embroidering their deaths, not traveling among them. But this is about Agatha, not the Endkeeper.

This is the farthest she's ever gone. Her arms grow tired. The shade takes over rowing, and to her surprise, the oars don't pass right through it. Agatha's eyes prickle as they near the outstretched hand she's always admired from afar. Up close it's exquisite, pearlescent. It's every color and no color all at once.

The boat docks. From the swirling vortex comes a sweet, cool breeze that blows without sound. She wipes her teary eyes with the back of her hand. "You can rest now," she says, but the shade shakes its head, slow and steady.

"We came all this way. You can't turn back now," she says.

The shade's yellow eyes crinkle into a smile. It taps her shoulder, then points to the yawning portal. It puts its hands together, leaning its head against them. *Sleep.*

She starts to protest. Who will take care of the garden and the nets and Mouse and the tapestries on the wall? The shade pats her on the head. It feels more solid than she does.

"My turn," it says in a voice much like her own.

"I have always wanted to know who it belongs to," says Agatha. A heavy weight slides off her shoulders. She takes the hand. It dwarfs her own. She looks back at the shade, its form shifting, shimmering, until it takes a form Agatha knows well.

"Thank you," she says, and the Endkeeper begins to paint.

KENDRA RECHT

Kendra Recht (she/her) is a speculative fiction writer hailing from Boston, MA. She has a BFA in Writing, Literature, and Publishing from Emerson College and her work has been featured in publications like *Elegant Literature*, *7th Circle Pyrite*, and *Spillwords*. She is currently in the midst of her third (and hopefully final) draft of a high fantasy novel. She can occasionally be found on instagram: @ksrecht.

Q&A with Kendra Recht

The following questions were posed by T.R. Steele, author of *Fully-Formed*, and are answered by Kendra Recht about their story *I Am Half-Sick of Shadows.*

This is a stunningly beautiful story; the details, like Agatha's tapestries, are woven with a careful hand. What made you decide to focus on including such details?

> Thank you! I usually have a pretty clear mental image of scenes and stories as I write, so the details I include are just the ones that come to me in the moment—more subconscious than intentional decision-making, I'd say. Even though I see a lot of these things vividly in my mind's eye, my greatest weakness as a writer is actually translating those visuals of the settings or important objects onto the page. I often struggle to write detailed descriptions of things that are less integral to the structure or

understanding of the story, like Agatha's physical appearance or the interior of the cabin. So the details that come through are the ones that interest me most and the ones I feel strongly about (such as what the shades look like or the tapestry art) or ones that directly impact the narrative (such as the way the hand looks, since it needs to hold Agatha's interest in a non-threatening, but otherworldly, intriguing way).

The title is a line from the 19th century poem "The Lady of Shalott" by Lord Alfred Tennyson. Did this poem directly inspire you to write this story? If not, what drew you to this line? And regardless, what else inspired you to write this story?

"The Lady of Shalott" is my all-time favorite poem. I've been a big fan ever since I first encountered it in the 1985 *Anne of Green Gables* movie, which my sibling and I used to watch *constantly*. I originally intended the story to be more of an overt spin on the poem, but it evolved and turned into this instead. There are still bits and pieces of it there: Agatha sews, Elaine weaves. Agatha and Elaine both can't leave their homes for magical reasons. Both Agatha and Elaine somewhat willingly float towards their death in a boat (which sounds really morbid as I'm writing it out). As for other inspirations, I was very much feeling a cozy Studio Ghibli vibe, and I wrote with that aesthetic in mind.

Now for a question about process, which is apt for a story that includes many different kinds of processes: how did you plot out this piece? How many drafts stood before you and the finished work?

> There was no plotting at all! The first line came to me and then I just started writing with a vague inspiration and very minimal direction. In general, I don't write a lot of drafts of short stories: I write from beginning to end in one sitting usually, and then as they inevitably evolve as I'm writing, I then will go back and clean up, only doing heavy edits if the story switched directions somewhere down the line or if I need to hit a specific word count. In this case, I'd say this is draft two: cleaned up the narrative from draft one, and then did a line edit/proofread for draft two.

As with many ghost stories or stories about the afterlife, this one read to me as ultimately life-affirming: Agatha was able to be who she wanted to be and take action in the end. What made you decide to include such a twist in the story, where Agatha moved on of her own volition rather than the shade? Was this always the envisioned ending, or did it develop through drafts?

> This ending 100% developed organically as I was writing the story. I had no clue how it would end until I got there and I was mostly operating off vibes and the vision I had of the characters. I did know that I wanted a

happy(ish?) ending, so I didn't want anything too heavy, and as far as death goes, this is about as cozy and peaceful I could make it. This just felt like the right conclusion for the characters and the story.

No More Walls

By T.S. Weaver

"Race you!" Gabby flashes me a gap-toothed smile, picks up her skirts and sprints for the edge of the trees. She knows I'm watching as she runs ahead of me, her laughter leading the way through the summer-clad trees, her long black hair pulled back in a thick braid. Small flashes of color, strands of silver, purple, and pink, catch the sun and I shake off the image. The colors faint, little more than a single strand here or there, but I can see them.

They've grown in number recently, but I expected it.

I can't help but smile at the sight; she's happy out here, we both are, but it doesn't mean our life is easy. There's always something to do, a chore, repair, baking, drying foods, preparing for winter. The work didn't do itself. There are no fairies or gnomes in the forest ready and willing to take care of us, no matter what some of the bards might have you believe.

We weren't alone out here, there are animals, birds, and others who call this place their home.

Away from a town, or even a village, without traveling for a day or more, we look after ourselves out here. No one judges, no whispers follow us, no one points or asks questions.

A bird calls out from a lone pine surrounded by oaks, ash, elm, and maple. His song carries with ease, picked up and repeated by others of his kind. A warning to the others that we were heading their way and by the time I reached the first tree the only calls I hear are warning ones.

I don't mind the birds, or their calls. This is the life we've chosen. I say we because should Gabby ever decide it's time to be around more people, I'd pack up everything here and take her for a visit. For now, we remain here, where it's peaceful, far more so than behind the city walls that were a part of my life for so many years. Here the only sounds are natural ones, the call of birds, cries of animals, the passage of our feet through the woods. It's all how it's supposed to be, the lack of other sounds is a blessing.

Visiting a town or village won't be easy, but I hope it will be many years before I have to face it. Not until I've explained things to her—but I don't want to hurt her. Better to wait until she is old enough to understand, which won't be long now. She's already asked a few questions about my hair, normally after she's seen hers in a reflection.

The blessing? Oh, not in the religious sense. I have no interest in religion, it's always been nothing but a source of pain, shame, and humiliation for me. I was

too loud, grew up too fast, wore the wrong clothing, shoes, colors. Whatever it was, I managed to upset someone, now I don't have to worry about them. What they think of me.

Or her.

"Going to win." Her voice trails back to me from deeper in the forest. She knows what to watch for, the dangers out here, and I know she'll keep to the path. We spent long enough going over what we needed to do, where we'd have to go, and what to take with us. She's seven now, easier than when she was six, harder than it will be when she's eight, and when she hits the changes, then I know the battle will begin. The first signs are there, the subtle shifts a mother notices even when she wants to deny it will ever happen. When she hopes she can keep her daughter safe. A child forever, but even if I could, I wouldn't try it. She deserves her own life, a chance to grow up and make all the choices that will combine to form her life as an adult.

I laugh and bunch up my skirts, catching them in one hand, the other wrapped around the handle of basket I wove out of willow switches the previous year. We need more this year, and other flexible switches for weaving. Wattle and daub construction is a messy way to build a fence or building, but it doesn't need craftsmen from the village. Besides, children and mud go hand in hand and she's still young enough to enjoy the mess.

It'll take a day or so before I have enough materials to work on the extra wall. The previous winter had been bitter, and I have an idea to build a

secondary wall several paces out from the house, going around most of it, leaving an opening, which I'll fill with a gate, so we can easily enter and exit. I think it would cut down on the wind hitting our small home. I can always then use the space for storage, especially for extra firewood during the winter.

My first idea had been to place hay bales between the house and the fence, and I might still do that at the back of the house, but the more I think about it, the idea of using it to store wood appeals to me and I wonder why I hadn't done it before.

I hadn't been raised to live out here, maybe that was why I hadn't thought about it, and I was learning as I went along. Which means I will make mistakes, continue to make them as the days, months, and years progressed.

Branches catch at my legs and skirt as I hurry after her. She's fast, always had been, since the day she'd figured out she could run instead of walk. She'll be faster than any she was likely to meet, adults included, by next year. That's if she continues to gain speed and strength at her current rate. It hasn't always been easy for her, no more than it was for any child. There's been a lot of falling down during those times, laughter, tears, giggles, all a part of growing up.

I slow down as the forest becomes thicker and make my way to the deer trail through the underbrush. Berries, unripe, glinted from raspberry and blackberry thickets. I make a mental note of the changes as I continue along the trail. It takes a moment, and Gabby gains extra ground. Her size

gives her an advantage in situations like this. She can make her way past falls, rockslides, and thick growth with half the effort. I envy her, and for a moment I wish I'd been able to enjoy a childhood beyond the walls.

Perhaps she'll regret how we lived when she was old enough to know the difference between our lives and how others lived, but I hope she won't. I don't have any control over what she might do or think or feel, no more than my parents had over me. I didn't understand, back then, they were trying to do what they thought was best.

A squirrel yattered at me from a high branch, and I waved at the small creature. One of the smaller reds? There were a few of them closer to our home, and a colony of them deeper in the forest. They didn't do well if there were too many gray squirrels around, and I'd been delighted the first time I'd seen them when I'd run from my family.

It wasn't really their fault. They tried to protect me, from everything, that's what a parent is supposed to do. Priests tell you that, grandmothers, aunties, anyone who'd deliberately closed their eyes on things they didn't want to see. I can't blame them, they didn't know any better. To them everything beyond the walls was dangerous, filled with darkness, dirt, foul creatures, or worse.

Gabby's shrieks of joy bounce from one tree to the next and a flash of color tells me she's found her favorite tree. I didn't have to see to know what she was doing. By the time I reach her she was already up

to the third set of branches and sitting, legs swinging as she watched me.

Her ability to climb never ceases to amuse me, though I've no doubt there will come a time when I watch her scramble up a tree, with my heart pounding, mouth dry, and fear threatening to steal life from my trembling corpse.

All parents face that, at some point in their lives. They see a child or youth doing something they know is dangerous, but they're either too late to stop it from happening, or they know trying could lead to an accident. The parent is left there, torn between pride, joy, and sheer terror.

"He's not here," the soft complaint drifts down from the branch. Three different colors of lichen formed a web of patterns across the branch, and halfway down the trunk. "Do you think he forgot?"

"Oh, he will be. He always comes to see you." I make my way to the hawthorn thicket and pull out my knife. "Just let me know when you see him. I don't want to be surprised." Not when I was working with a blade.

"I know," said Gabby.

Soft taps follow me to the thicket. Her heels drum against the trunk, and I know she'll do as I ask. Well, unless she was distracted by something. I smile at the thought and shake out my skirts and gathering them at the front, forming a pad of cloth before I drop to my knees. Between skirt and shift, and the apron I'd tied in place first thing that morning, I had enough protection between my knees and the ground to

prevent discomfort from turning into pain before I've finished my task.

Life without other adults is hard, I'll admit that. Not as hard as going through childbirth alone, or the aftermath, but still difficult. I had no one to lean on, to take up the tasks of keeping the hearth lit, food prepared, and the home repaired when I fell sick or I injured myself. I'd been ill enough, several times, had skipped meals, chores, and other things. The last time had been easier, but it was still difficult and there was only so much I could do to prepare ahead for such times.

Gabby was old enough now to help, but I try not to place too much on her shoulders.

The reality meant she did work. From the day she was old enough to sit up on her own and hold something, I'd been teaching her how to work, using games to help her learn. I don't want her to grow up thinking I'd had her only to ease my load.

I lean in and pick out the first switch. Oh, I know they aren't switches, per se, as I won't ever use them as such, but it was what I'd been told they were called, when I'd asked about them all those years ago. Branches, saplings, sticks, they have many names, and I cut them with care, not wanting to add to the numerous cuts and small injuries on my hands and arms.

I don't have to look at them to see the marks, old and new.

"He's here!" Joy carries her words. "Oh, he's really here. Look!"

I smile and clean off the small, hooked knife, the wooden handle now worn to fit my palm, then set it back in my basket. "I told you he would be." I don't need to look to know what I would see. Still, I won't disappoint my daughter when it is such a little thing to do.

Gabby stands on the branch, her feathered companion next to her, one hand resting on the tree trunk. She doesn't need it for balance. She has that from her father. The same father who gave her the strands of color in her hair; strands that look, if you inspected them close enough, like narrow feathers. The first strands appeared in her eyebrows, minuscule things you wouldn't notice without getting right in her face with tweezers and a magnifying lens. Look at her nails and you'll see they're different, a slight curl at the ends with tips sharp enough to hook into bark.

Despite the work, the stress, the dangers that come from living without other adults in my life, all I need to do is look at Gabby and I know, there's nothing that could convince me to return to life behind city walls ...

T.S. WEAVER

Originally from England, T.S. Weaver lives in Minnesota with her husband and her now retired service dog. Her work includes the *Hell's Own* series (Military SF), paranormal alternative history, fantasy, and horror. Her most recent novel, *Silverfur*, featuring an older heroine and her cat, releases end of March 2025.

Q&A with T.S. Weaver

The following questions were posed by Christian Emecheta, author of *An Ordinary Love Story*, and are answered by T.S. Weaver about their story *No More Walls*.

What inspired you to create this story and what does life "beyond the walls" mean to you as the author?

> Walls and boxes, people are always trying to shove each other into them, locking them into choices often made far too young, or without the information needed. To me living beyond walls also means stepping out of those boxes society, parents, expectations all want to push you into. We're living very trying times, endless newscycles, 24/7 breaking news. I wanted to focus on a life where none of that matters, only a mother's love for her child.

The relationship between the mother and daughter feels very authentic, I would like to know if you draw from any personal experiences?

> Yes, I'm a mother of three—now adult—children. Two are autistic, and one is a fragile (unstable) type one diabetic. There have been, and will continue to be, challenges and all I can do is give them the tools in the hope it will be enough.

What challenges did you face in writing from the perspective of someone who's essentially a single parent living off the grid?

> I had to turn back the clock, to a time when I'd lived effectively as a single parent, while in a relationship, and how that impacted me raising a young child. There are a lot of married/involved single parents, and I think a lot of parents in that situation discover just what they're capable of. Not everyone manages, and I nearly didn't, especially toward the end, but during that time I took joy in the small things with my child. As for the off grid part, lots of reading over the years about how people lived during medieval times, and earlier.

The voice feels very much like someone from an earlier historical period. What time period or literary influences helped you develop this narrative voice?

> It's a setting I've been working on for decades, even met my husband using that setting (html

chat rooms for text based rpgs), but I also listen to a lot of historical non fiction, podcasts, and read a lot about the pre-industrial age. Half the time when I'm working I've got a podcast like the Ancients, or Not Just the Tudors, or Gone Medieval on—I have ADD, so my brain won't let me focus on working unless it has other things to distract it.

An Ordinary Love Story

By Christian Emecheta

The spring that Marna arrived our village, located southwest of Scotland was the wettest anyone could remember. Rain poured down for four days without cease, turning the dirt roads to a foot of mud and forcing everyone to retreat behind closed doors and shuttered windows. It was during this downpour that I first met her, standing in the doorway of my master's cottage, dripping wet with a small cloth bundle clutched to her chest.

I was eighteen then, in my third year as a trainee to Master Gallus, the village herb doctor. Our cottage stood apart from the others, located at the edge of the thick forest where herbs grew in abundance. Master Gallus had been teaching me his craft since I was fifteen, when my father decided I was too smart for trading and sought a different path for his only daughter.

"Is this the home of Master Gallus?" the stranger asked, water streaming from her dark hair and pooling at her feet.

I nodded, unable for a moment to find my voice. There was something about her that stole my words—perhaps the unusual ashen color of her eyes or the strange accent that lilted her speech like a half-remembered melody.

"I'm Linden," I managed to speak. "Master Gallus's apprentice."

Before she could reply, my master appeared behind me. He was a tall man with a stooped back that made him appear much older than fifty years, his once-brown beard now streaked with white.

"You must be Marna," he said. "My cousin wrote that you might arrive before Beltane. Come in, child. You're half-drowned."

I stepped aside as she entered, confusion swirling inside me. Master Gallus had never mentioned a visitor, much less one who would arrive before the spring festival. But I knew better than to question him in front of a stranger. Instead, I feigned busyness by fetching dry linens while Master Gallus stoked the fire.

"Linden," he said as I returned, "Marna will be joining our household. She comes from the northern lands to study."

And just like that, my solitary apprenticeship ended.

The first weeks with Marna were awkward and filled with silence. We shared the small loft above the main room of the cottage, sleeping on straw mattresses less than an arm's length apart, yet the distance between us felt inestimable. She worked alongside me, grinding herbs and preparing tinctures with skillful hands, following Master Gallus's instructions with detailed attention. But when our work was done, she would retreat into silence, often sitting by the window with a small book of bound parchment, writing with a charcoal pen until the light faded.

It was during one of these quiet evenings that I finally gathered the courage to strike up a conversation with her.

"What do you usually write in your book?" I asked, looking up from the hemlock root I was crushing for a sleeping draught.

Marna's hand paused above the page. "I record the plants I find here that don't grow in my homeland. And I write songs."

"Songs? What kind of songs?"

A small smile gave away her excitement, the first I had seen since her arrival. "Songs about the forest. About the changing of seasons. About journeys." She hesitated. "Would you like to hear one?"

I nodded eagerly, setting aside my work. Marna closed her book and began to sing in a clear, sweet voice that seemed to fill our small loft with loveliness:

"Through rowan and willow,
Through oak, ash, and thorn,
I walk with the old ones
From dusk until morn.
The forest remembers
What people forget,
The secrets of healing
The earth's sacred debt."

Her voice trailed off, and she looked almost embarrassed. "It's not finished yet."

"It's beautiful," I said, meaning it. "How did you learn these things? About the forest and herbs, I mean."

Marna's expression unstiffened. "My grandmother taught me. She was a healer in our village, just as your Master Gallus is here. When she died last winter, I had nowhere else to go. She always spoke of her cousin in the southern lands who had vast knowledge of herbs. That is why I came."

Something in her voice made me understand the courage it must have taken to journey so far alone. "I'm glad you did," I said, making sure to sound sincere.

From that evening forward, a tentative friendship began to blossom between us. It grew slowly but steadily, like the Yew tree in Master Gallus's Garden.

Our friendship was nurtured by our shared love for knowledge and long days spent working beside each other.

As Beltane approached, the village buzzed with anticipation. It would be the first major celebration since the rains had ceased, and everyone was eager to gather around the bonfire, to dance and feast and welcome the warmth of summer.

"You will need new clothes for the festival," Master Gallus declared one morning. "Both of you. It wouldn't speak well of me for my apprentices to appear in work-stained garments."

He handed each of us a package of cloth—mine, a soft green dress, the color of new leaves. Marna got a deep blue dress like the ocean. I used my fingers to feel the fabric, it was smoother than anything I had owned before.

"It's linen from the southern traders," Master Gallus explicated. "A fair exchange for the fever tincture I prepared for the merchant's daughter."

That evening, Marna and I sat by the hearth, adding decorations to our festival garments. My needle moved clumsily through the fine fabric, creating uneven seams that I knew I would need to redo. Beside me, Marna's fingers worked with swift accuracy.

"Here," she said, noticing my frustration. "Let me show you."

She moved closer, her hands guiding mine through the proper motion. "My grandmother always said that stitching is like walking—it should flow naturally, without thought."

"Everything seems to come naturally to you," I sighed. "Master Gallus has never had a quicker student."

Marna shook her head. "That's not true. I've seen how you recognize plants by their smallest details, how you know exactly when to harvest them for greatest potency. I could study for years and never develop your instinct."

Her words warmed me more than the fire. It was the first time anyone had recognized my abilities, had seen them as valuable rather than common knowledge.

"We could teach each other," I suggested, emboldened by her praise. "I could show you the local plants, and you could teach me your northern rituals."

Marna smiled. Seated close to the firelight, her eyes seemed to glow. "I would like that very much, Linden."

Beltane came as expected. Master Gallus left early to help prepare the festival grounds, leaving Marna and me to gather flowers for the celebration.

We ventured into the forest, baskets in hand, following the slender path that traversed beneath old oak and silver birch. Spring had transformed the

woodland into a gathering of beautiful plants and happy animals.

"Look," I said, pointing to a patch of small white flowers. "Wood anemones. They're perfect for the festival wreaths."

Marna knelt beside me as I carefully harvested the blooms, explaining as I worked, "We must leave most of them to ensure they return next year. That's what Master Gallus taught me—take only what you need, and always with gratitude."

"In my village," Marna said, "we sang to the plants before harvesting them. My grandmother said it honors their sacrifice."

She demonstrated, singing a simple melody in a language I didn't understand but found achingly beautiful. When she finished, I asked her to teach me the song, and we spent the morning singing to the forest as we filled our baskets with flowers.

By midday, we had gathered enough blooms to create the traditional Beltane wreaths. We sat under a huge tree to shield ourselves from the scorching rays of the sun while intertwining stems and blossoms as tiny birds called from the branches above us.

"In your northern lands," I asked, "do you celebrate Beltane too?"

Marna nodded. "Yes, though we call it by a different name. The rituals are similar—the bonfire, the dancing, the welcoming of summer." She hesitated, her fingers stilling on her nearly-completed wreath. "But there is one custom we have that I haven't seen here. On the eve of the festival, those seeking love are asked to place bowls of curry and

sugar at the edge of the forest for the Fae folk, asking for their blessing."

"Do the Fae folk answer?" I asked, half-joking.

Marna remained serious. "My grandmother found love that way. She always said the old magic works for those who believe in it."

I pondered on her words as I finished my wreath, knitting in the last few sprigs of lavender. The idea was fanciful, certainly, yet something about it stole my attention. Perhaps it was simply the magic of the day or the strange intimacy of the forest path, but I found myself wanting to believe her.

"Could we try it?" I asked impulsively. "Tonight, before the festival?"

Marna smiled and responded. "Yes," "I think we could."

The village had been transformed for the festival. A maypole stood at its center, festooned with ribbons of every color that flapped in the gentle breeze. Tables groaned under the weight of the feast—freshly baked bread, roasted root vegetables, mushroom pies, early berries preserved from last season, and pancakes drizzled with syrup. The scent of wine hung in the air as villagers filled their cups from large clay jugs.

Master Gallus presided over the festivities as one of the village elders, his stooped figure now adorned in a robe of deep burgundy rather than his usual herb-stained browns. He nodded approvingly as Marna and

I approached in our new garments, flower wreaths crowning our heads.

"You both honor our household," he said, his voice gruff with unexpected emotion. "Now go, enjoy the celebration. You've earned it with your hard work these past weeks."

The day passed in a whirl of dancing and feasting. I taught Marna the traditional dances of our village, laughing as we twirled around the maypole with the other young people. As the sun began its slow descent, the famous village musician began to play a gentle melody on his pipe.

"Master Gallus told me you're a singer," the old musician called to Marna. "Would you share a song from your homeland with us?"

All eyes turned to her, and I saw her hesitate, a flush rising to her cheeks. Without thinking, I took her hand and squeezed it gently. She looked at me, and something transpired between us—a moment of encouragement, of shared understanding.

Marna stepped forward and began to sing the song she had taught me in the forest. Her voice rose sharply through the evening air, and though the villagers couldn't understand the words, they fell silent, captivated by the lingering melody. When she finished, there was a moment of hushed admiration before applause erupted around us.

As the night deepened, the bonfire was lit, bright flames illuminated the dark sky, giving a delightful feeling to the celebration. According to tradition, couples would soon jump the fire together,

symbolizing their commitment to each other for the coming year.

Marna and I stood slightly apart from the others, watching as the first brave pairs made their leap across the flames.

"It's time," she whispered to me. "For our own ritual."

We slipped away unnoticed, returning to the cottage to collect what we needed—two small wooden bowls, a plate of sugar from Master Gallus's stores, and a container of curry traded from the village spice dealer that morning.

The forest was different at night, transformed into a mix of sounds and shadows. We followed the path by the light of the rising moon until we reached the clearing where we had made our wreaths earlier that day. There, Marna showed me how to prepare our offerings—pouring curry into each bowl, drizzling it with sugar, then placing a spring of lavender atop each one.

"Now, we must speak our wishes," she instructed, her voice slightly above the nighttime sounds of the forest. "Silently, so that only the Fae can hear."

I closed my eyes, feeling slightly foolish yet strangely optimistic. What was my wish? It came to me with sudden clarity—not a specific request for love, but something simpler and more profound; understanding, connection. The very things I had begun to find with Marna.

When I opened my eyes, Marna was watching me, her face soft in the moonlight.

"Now we leave them," she said, "and return to the festival. Whatever happens next is up to the old magic."

As we turned to go, a sudden breeze rustled through the clearing, causing the leaves to tremble. It might have been my imagination, but for a moment, I thought I heard faint laughter, like tiny bells chiming in the night.

We returned to find the festival at its peak. The bonfire burned bright, and most of the village was dancing around it, their faces irradiated by the flames, happy people moving to the primal rhythm of drums. Master Gallus was nowhere to be seen, likely retired to his bed as he often did before the wilder parts of the celebrations began.

"Shall we join them?" Marna asked, her eyes reflecting the firelight.

Instead of responding, I took her hand and led her toward the bonfire. Without discussing it, we knew what we were going to do. As we approached the flames, I felt a pull by something powerful within me—not fear, but a joyful sensation.

Together, we ran and leaped over the fire, our joined hands never separating, our feet landing firmly on the other side. The watching villagers cheered, but I barely heard them. All I could focus on was Marna's face, alight with the same happiness I felt coursing through me.

Later, as the celebration continued around us, we found a quiet spot beneath an oak tree. The music and laughter created a backdrop to our conversation as we spoke of our visions and anticipations, of the herbs we would gather in summer, of journeys we might take together to find rare plants.

"Do you think it worked?" I asked eventually. "Our offering to the Fae?"

Marna's reply was to reach out and tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, her fingers lingering against my cheek. "I think," she said softly, "that sometimes the magic is already there, waiting for us to find it."

And as her lips met mine in a gentle kiss that felt amazing, I knew she was right.

The days that followed Beltane unfolded like the pages of a beautifully written storybook, each page revealing new marvels. Master Gallus, observing the change between Marna and me, smiled his rare smile and assigned us to work together even more closely.

"You balance each other," he said one evening as we sat by the fire, sorting the day's harvest. "Linden's intuition with plants, Marna's precision and dexterity—together you create remedies more potent than either could alone."

His words were the closest he would come to acknowledging what had blossomed between his apprentices, but they carried his blessing nonetheless.

As spring gave way to summer, Marna and I established a routine. Mornings were spent in the

garden or forest, gathering herbs while the dew still clung to their leaves. Afternoons were for preparing remedies under Master Gallus's watchful eye, learning the proper methods for drying, grinding, steeping, and distilling. Evenings belonged to us alone—time for sharing stories and songs, for planning our future together.

"There is an old cottage deeper in the forest," I told Marna one night as we lay side by side in our loft, hands intertwined. "It once belonged to Master Gallus's teacher, but it has stood empty since her passing. Master Gallus says that when my apprenticeship ends next year, it could be mine if I wish to have it."

"Your very own cottage," Marna mused, her voice pensive in the darkness. "With a garden for healing herbs and vegetables. Perhaps a plantation for sugarcane."

"And space to teach others," I added, sharing the vision that had been forming in my mind. "Not just one apprentice, but any who wish to learn the old ways of healing."

"A place where people could come when they need help," Marna continued, "not just for physical ailments but for the spiritual injuries too."

We fell asleep planning our future sanctuary, a place of healing and growth that would honor both our traditions.

The summer solstice arrived with intense heat and clear skies. The forest offered a cool refuge, and it was there that Master Gallus led us for a special lesson.

"Today," he announced as we followed him along a seldom-used path, "we search for the rarest herb in these woods—Heartsbane."

I gasped. Heartsbane was legendary, a plant said to cure ailments of the heart, both physical and emotional. Many herbalists claimed it didn't exist at all, that it was merely a story told to stimulate the curiosity of apprentices.

"It grows only in the deepest part of the forest," Master Gallus continued, "and reveals itself only to those with pure intentions. I have found it just three times in my life, always when I needed it most."

We walked for hours, venturing farther into the forest than I had ever been. The trees grew larger here, looking like giants whose canopies allowed only dappled sunlight to reach the forest floor. The usual chatter of birds faded, replaced by a profound silence that seemed to be observing us.

Master Gallus finally stopped in a small clearing dominated by a massive tree, its trunk so wide that it would take three tall people joining hands to encircle it.

"This is as far as I go," he said, lowering himself onto a fallen log. "The Heartsbane must be sought individually, by those who truly need its medicine. Follow your instincts, but remember—look not with your eyes but with your heart."

Marna and I exchanged uncertain glances before setting off in different directions. I walked slowly, trying to quiet my thoughts as Master Gallus had taught me. *Look not with your eyes but with your heart.* What did that mean, exactly?

I closed my eyes, breathing deeply of the forest air. It smelled different here—richer, elaborate, with notes of moss and mushroom, wet stones and rotten wood. I let my feet carry me forward, trusting some deeper sense to guide me.

When I finally opened my eyes, I found myself in another clearing, smaller than the first and carpeted with soft moss. A shaft of sunlight impaled the canopy, illuminating a patch of small blue flowers I had never seen before. They seemed to sparkle in the light, almost as if they were made of precious stones rather than living tissue.

I knelt beside them, not daring to touch. Their beauty was appealing, their presence a gift I hadn't expected to receive. As I gazed at them, a sense of profound peace overwhelmed me, along with the certainty that I had found what I was seeking.

"Heartsbane," I muttered, the name feeling right on my tongue.

I carefully harvested three of the flowers, leaving the rest to thrive and spread. As I stood to return to

Master Gallus, I saw Marna at the other side of the clearing, watching me with a smile.

"You found it," she said, moving to join me. "I knew you would."

"You didn't find any?" I asked, surprised.

Marna shook her head. "I didn't need to. I already found what heals my heart." She moved closer and kissed me on the lips. "It's you, Linden. It has been since that rainy day when you opened the door to me."

We returned to Master Gallus hand in hand. When I showed him the blue flowers, tears welled in his aged eyes.

"In all my years," he said, sounding emotional, "I have never seen Heartsbane reveal itself to an apprentice. This confirms what I have known since Beltane—you are ready to carry on the old ways, both of you together."

As the season waned and the first hints of autumn touched the forest, Master Gallus led us to the abandoned cottage he had spoken of. It stood in a clearing much like the one where I had found the Heartsbane, moss-covered stones forming walls that had withstood countless seasons, a thatched roof that needed mending but was largely intact.

"With work," he said, surveying the structure, "it could be ready by spring. Time enough for Linden to complete her apprenticeship formally, and for Marna to learn the last of what I can teach her."

We spent the day clearing debris from the cottage, envisioning how it would look when restored. A stone hearth dominated one wall, large enough to heat the entire space and provide a cooking fire. Windows faced east and west to catch both morning and evening light. Outside, the remains of a garden could still be discerned, waiting to be reclaimed from the encroaching forest.

"It's perfect," I said as we rested in the doorway, watching the sun begin its descent behind the trees. "I can already see us here, making it our own."

Marna leaned her head against my shoulder. "A place of our own making," she agreed. "Built on the foundation of what came before, but shaped by our hands and hearts."

Master Gallus nodded approvingly. "The old ways continue, but they also change with each new generation. That is how they have stayed alive." He placed a gnarled hand on each of our shoulders. "You will make this place a home of healing, as it was meant to be."

As we walked back to the village in the approaching night, I felt a contentment deeper than any I had known before. The path ahead looks rich—a life of persistence and friendship, rooted in the healing traditions that had brought Marna and me together.

The forest creaked around us, bearing witness to our journey as it had to countless others before us. It dawned on me that we were not just two young women finding our way in a vast world; we were a

continuing story of healing and growth that had no beginning and no end.

CHRISTIAN EMECHETA

Christian Emecheta is a writer, illustrator, and computer scientist. His fiction and poetry have appeared in many online publications and magazines such as *Arts Lounge Magazine*, *Writefluence Anthology*, 9th Edition of *Chinua Achebe Poetry/Essay Anthology*, *Synchronized Chaos Online Journal*, *The Decolonial Passage*, *Mocking Owl Roost*, and elsewhere. He writes songs when inspired by a tune or lyrics. Christian enjoys reading, watching movies, and getting lost in his imagination. He hopes to travel the world.

Q&A with Christian Emecheta

The following questions were posed by T.S. Weaver, author of *No More Walls*, and are answered by Christian Emecheta about their story *An Ordinary Love Story*.

I loved the use of music/poetry from Marna, do you often use poetry or music in stories, if so is there a particular musician or poet that has influenced you?

> Thank you for noticing that! Yes, I do enjoy incorporating poetry and music into my stories when it feels natural to the narrative. I find that songs and verses can reveal character depth and cultural background in ways that regular dialogue sometimes can't. While I draw inspiration from various sources, I'm particularly influenced by traditional folk music and oral storytelling, both from my own Nigerian heritage and from the research I do into other cultures. There's something universal

about how music connects people across different backgrounds, which is what I wanted to capture with Marna's songs bridging her northern homeland with Linden's village.

Scotland is an amazing place, filled with history and mystery and I was fortunate to live there for several years, I love that you use it as a setting without narrowing down location. That said, have you been to Scotland before? Do you have a favorite place there, or if you haven't been, is there a specific location there you'd like to visit?

I haven't been to Scotland yet, though it's definitely on my list of places I'd love to visit someday! I chose Scotland as the setting because of exactly what you mentioned—that incredible history and mystery. During my research for the story, I became fascinated by the Scottish Highlands and the Isle of Skye in particular. The landscape seems perfect for the kind of story I wanted to tell, with its ancient forests and deep connection to herbal traditions. I deliberately kept the location somewhat vague because I wanted to focus on the universal aspects of the story while still honoring the rich Scottish cultural elements like Beltane. It's wonderful to hear from someone who actually lived there.

Heartsease is a beautiful plant, and used in herblore in real life. Did you already know about the plant

before using it in the story, or was this something you came across during research?

> It came from my research into traditional healing practices. I love exploring herbal folklore when I'm developing stories, and heartsease (viola tricolor) kept coming up in my reading about plants used for emotional healing. Research is one of my favorite parts of writing - I can spend hours learning about everything from medieval Scottish customs to the properties of different herbs.

I loved the balance between the two characters, how they compliment each other with not only personalities but skills. Is there a particular craft or hobby you enjoy outside of writing?

> Besides writing, I'm really passionate about reading and research, as you probably picked up from the story! I love learning about different cultures, traditional practices, and historical periods. I also enjoy cooking, traveling, and meeting new people. I find that having interests outside of writing often feeds back into my stories in unexpected ways. The balance between Linden and Marna actually reflects something I believe strongly - that we all have different strengths, and the most beautiful relationships happen when people complement rather than compete with each other.

Colophon

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